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**To Light and Guard**

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### Summary

Lana Winters has emerged from hell to reenter a cold world without Wendy. Sister Mary Eunice survived the exorcism, but she sees demons at every turn; she fears God will never love her again. They are Briarcliff’s rejects, the world’s outcasts, now thrust together in a twist of cosmic irony. Can they help one another heal? Or will the gravity of all of their trials eventually crush them both?
"Angel of God, my Guardian dear, to whom His love commits me here, ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen." -the guardian angel prayer

When the demon exited Sister Mary Eunice's body, a frigidity sucked into her to fill the void that it left behind; the cold seeped down into the very depth of her bones. A bright white light beamed from somewhere above. "J-Jesus?" she whispered to the face that loomed between her and the light source. But the shape ducked out of view before she could murmur to it again. The light didn't look like heaven, not in any way that she had imagined it. This light didn't sparkle and glow with the warmth of God's love like she had felt before. It chilled her, exposed her; the whiteness of it, like a blizzard, left no room for a temperate gesture. Her nude body shuddered once under the gazes of the other people in the room—she could not make out their faces, but their silhouettes moved like shadows, voices familiar and yet unrecognizable.

The words made little sense to the befuddled Mary Eunice, flowing into nonsensical jumbles. "Her temperature is spiking again. We need to cool her down—"

"No. Get her out of here, now, while we still can. She's still susceptible." A cold washcloth dabbed at her face. She flinched away from the rough fabric against her sensitive, sweaty skin and attempted to mumble a protest, but it emerged in a slur. "She won't survive another exorcism. We must get her to safety while we have the opportunity." There were hands all over her skin; each one stung and smarted upon contact. Please, no… A thousand pleas died on the dry fat of her tongue, and tears rolled down her hot cheeks. "Help me move her."

Someone wrapped her up tightly. It scratched against her exposed flesh like sandpaper. She whimpered and closed her eyes against the bright shining of the light, turned her head away. "Are you sure that she's herself again? Absolutely sure?"

The hands on her roam some more, lifted her like an infant and settled her onto something much less comfortable. Her body throbbed with the impact and her head lolled backward with weakness. Please, God, just let me die. "Look at her face. She's crying. She's ashamed. This is our Sister Mary Eunice."

"The devil has many tricks, Monsignor."

A cool touch brushed her hair out of her face. Her frazzled nerve endings drove pain through each intimate contact. "Not like this." The soft tone of his voice shifted abruptly. "Take her to the car. We must instruct Miss Winters on her condition. Neither of them are to speak about this. We cannot risk the exposure of Briarcliff right now." He cleared his throat. "We have things we must clean up."

The feeling of drifting followed, and Mary Eunice drifted like a leaf on a stream, a feather in the wind, in and out of consciousness. Her head bumped several times against something solid; each time, she grunted and attempted to shift, but she didn't have the strength. Those invasive hands had left her alone. Something rumbled underneath her. It sounds like the ocean, she considered.
dimly. The waves rolled in and out, carrying her along with them. The salty flavor of the water stung the tip of her tongue. It left her parched and shivering with the icy wind that hadn’t yet left her goosebump-ridden skin.

How long she lolled about on the ocean, striking her head and wanting to die, she hadn’t a clue. Her world faded to a numb darkness. Only the cold remained.

…

As the long black car pulled up in front of Lana's house, her lip automatically curled without consideration. She clutched her cup of coffee tightly, watching as the driver, an unfamiliar man, and the Monsignor emerged from the front of the vehicle. How she had allowed herself to be bullied into this position, she wasn't certain. Mary Eunice. What a bitch. After the nun had confirmed her pregnancy, the mere thought of allowing such a sadistic woman into her home caused her to cringe. I'll take care of that problem whether she likes it or not.

But the Monsignor and Sister Jude claimed possession. Lana had never been a religious woman, but after she had witnessed one piece of the exorcism, she had suspended her disbelief long enough to agree to this arrangement. They had targeted her while she was vulnerable. And the thought of returning to this house alone, the home that she had shared with Wendy, where her lover had been kidnapped and murdered by Bloody Face, paralyzed her heart and her lungs. She had not slept since she arrived home. The thought caused her mug of coffee to tremble in her hands.

The unfamiliar man roughly dragged Mary Eunice from the backseat of the car, and she fell like a limp ragdoll between them, clad in a thin robe that ended just above her knees and had a dip between the breasts. Her blonde hair fell in dull mats around her face. Lana placed the coffee mug on the end table and went out into the yard. "Couldn't you have managed to put some clothes on her?" A deep scowl etched itself onto Lana's face. The cold nighttime dew upon the grass shivered upon her bare feet. As Mary Eunice slumped away from the Monsignor in a semi-conscious attempt to free herself, he pitched her back upward.

"Just manhandle her, why don't you?" Lana wanted to fume, but she pinched her tongue between her teeth.

"It was imperative that we remove her from the facility immediately. She's susceptible to all manner of spiritual attacks now." He held eye contact, and upon his face, weariness crept in wrinkles beside and beneath his eyes. A shadow of a beard crawled prickled across his jawline. "Miss Winters?"

"Bring her inside." Mary Eunice mumbled and grumbled in a delirium as they hauled her into the house, and once they dropped her upon the couch, she curled into a shivering ball. Fat tears rolled down her cheeks, eyes glazed in pain, and she rocked herself for comfort. Lana pressed her hand to her sweaty forehead. "She's burning up. Why didn't you call a doctor? She's ill."

The Monsignor held up a hand. "No—No one can know about this. An exorcism is a matter of utmost privacy. That you know about what happened to her is already a grave violation of church standards based solely on the need that she must be removed from Briarcliff."

"Have you even given her any Tylenol?" The uncomfortable silence that followed told Lana everything she needed to know. She took a measured breath to calm herself. Sister Mary Eunice had been in her house for fewer than five minutes, and already, Lana's blood pressure had skyrocketed. "Fine. Where are her things?"

"We didn't have time to collect anything. Her chamber will be combed through at some point this week for anything that she might need while she's here. Her habit was destroyed—"
"I recall," Lana said in a stark tone, hands tightening into fists of resistance. The memory, evoked by his words, sucked to the front of her mind where she had hoped not to revisit it.

_Lana peered through a glass window in the room where they had bound Sister Mary Eunice. "What are you doing to her?" she demanded of the Monsignor, but his pensive look gave no answers. As the priest continued to bless her, his words mingling to Latin, the nun writhed against her bounds and foamed at the mouth. "She's seizing! She needs a hospital!" Lana reached to let herself into the room, but the Monsignor stopped her. She jerked away from his touch. Within the room, the nun snarled in an inhuman growl, and at the priest's touch, her clothing caught fire. Another nun dove to rip the habit off of her and smother the flames. Underneath it, the lacy red lingerie remained untouched by the ashes and soot. Black vomit spewed from her mouth. Lana stumbled back from the door. "Jesus H. Christ."

The Monsignor's weak smile accompanied a nod. "We thank you deeply for this, Miss Winters, from the bottoms of all our hearts. Sister Mary Eunice deserves much better than what we can provide at Briarcliff. And you will receive a monthly stipend for her care. As long as it takes for her to get well enough to be appointed to a new position by Mother Superior."

Lana studied the trembling woman from the corner of her eye. In spite of all of her resignations, all of her insistence that she would feel no pity for Mary Eunice, sympathy curled up in her stomach and settled like a cold snake. She didn't know what she believed. Demonic possession sounded farfetched. But after all that she had seen at Briarcliff, things she had once considered impossible had come to light. "She will be safe here, Monsignor."

"Call if you need anything." The men dismissed themselves without a farewell, and Lana did not linger on them. She locked the door behind them; she kept everything in the house locked now, even the windows.

For a long minute, she stared at Mary Eunice, sniveling and puny on her couch, face streaked red with fever and hands trembling as she fought against the chills. One part of her wanted to reject the nun outright, to forego every vow that she had taken and dismiss her. But the other, more tender part wanted to comfort an ill woman in a time of need. Neither half of her psyche could square with the other, so instead, she fetched some Tylenol and a glass of water.

As she sank onto the couch, Mary Eunice recoiled. "I'm not going to hurt you." A bit of a sarcastic snip worked its way into her voice. She made no effort to stifle it. "Here." She pushed the pills onto Mary Eunice's tongue and poured the rim of the glass against her upper lip. "Swallow. Swallow." After a moment of sputtering, she obeyed. A reek of piss and sweat rose off of her like a dirty, wet dog. "Good god, you're gross. You're burning up."

The nun lolled back onto the couch cushions without responding, and Lana sighed. "Come here." She flopped one of the other woman's arms over her shoulder and tugged her up. In an awkward stagger, she managed to haul Mary Eunice through her bedroom into the bathroom, and she sat her on the toilet. "Don't fall over. You've got to take a bath. You smell like a wet dog." The faucet squeaked as she turned it on, and water poured out in turn.

Plucking the robe from Mary Eunice's body caused a rolling sense of wrongness to tremble through Lana, but she paid it no heed. Sex was the last thing on her mind. A year ago, she would have inspected each inch of flesh with her eyes, taken advantage of the exposure to drink in the pale breasts and the rosebud nipples, but in this room where she and Wendy had once showered together, the thought of examining another woman sickened her. Each stolen glance felt like a violation of fidelity. Eyes down on the tile floors, Lana lowered Mary Eunice into the warm water and pumped soap into the washcloth.

Cleansing the stench and filth from her body was an obligation that Lana fulfilled without much
consideration; she knew that, if she allowed herself to think about it, she would inevitably linger too long on thoughts better left unvisited. Floral scents filled the humid air of the bathroom as she gently scrubbed the scum from Mary Eunice's body. How long they had allowed the nun to go without a bath, she wasn't certain and wouldn't ask, but she knew that it had been too long. The water discolored with each rinse, taking a translucent gray hue.

As she gathered the blonde hair into her hands, she poured water over her head, using her hand to shield Mary Eunice's eyes. The nun remained unresponsive, eyes periodically fluttering open and then falling closed again while her head rolled about on her neck. Lana worked a conditioner through the matted locks and began to run her brush through it. "Sorry," she said when she tugged, but Mary Eunice did not complain. Lana rolled her lower lip between her teeth as she worked the bristles of the brush through the sticky hair.

Once she had straightened it into a manageable length, she washed Mary Eunice's hair with shampoo and rinsed it. How did I become the maid here? she griped internally. "Lie back," she instructed, and she guided the other back with a firm hand on her shoulder. "Good." With a towel, she gently dried the golden blonde locks and took her brush to it again.

Sister Mary Eunice's awareness wavered. She had felt someone grab her, two someones, dangle her out in the cold where the breeze tickled all the parts she didn't want exposed, but the voices made no sense to her. Her fevered skin throbbed everywhere she was touched. But when she sank under and rose above again, the pain had faded from her body; it had all localized just behind her eyes and pulsed there. Her face screwed up, and she groaned.

"Sister?" A woman's voice startled her. She wasn't alone. She grappled for increased alertness. Where am I? What happened? Her memories ran through her fingers like sand. But her naked body was submerged in lukewarm water, and the air smelled like sweet soaps. "Are you alright?"

She reached to remedy her exposure first, pinching her legs close together. Who is she? Her eyes refused to open against the glowing light overhead. "It's too—bright." The words thickened like honey in the back of her throat and slurred.

"Would you like me to turn the lights off?"

Yes, please. She couldn't quite manage that. "Mhm." A few seconds passed before the light switch clicked, and the darkness swallowed her eyelids, allowing them to part. She could scarcely make out a silhouette of the other woman. The vision quivered at the edges, her head swimming with pain and emptiness. "I—I don't remember…" The whisper died on her tongue.

She did remember. Fragments, the black mist swirling around her and consuming her, the demon thrashing about in her mind—the gap that it had left in her belly oozed invisible blood. She gasped at the faces that circled before her in a mocking haze. Surging upward, she grappled at the sides of the bathtub. Her head spun, black blots dancing in her vision. Her belly turned. She gulped at the bile that threatened to eject from her stomach. With the loss of balance, she floundered like a spineless fish.

Lana dove to steady her. "Hey—Hey!" She seized the nun by the shoulders. "Relax! Don't drown yourself!" She had to bite her tongue to keep from demanding, What the hell is your problem? Mary Eunice reluctantly fell backward. "It's okay. You're safe here."

In the darkness, her eyes glittered like fearful gemstones, a deer paralyzed by headlights. "Lana." At the croaked word, Lana inclined her eyebrows. "I saw—Thredson—Bloody Face—" She could not form a coherent thought from the snippets that she could recall. She had heard his thoughts, so similar to the dark things that the demon itself whispered to her ear.
"He's dead." The bitter words flamed from her lips. "He'll never hurt anyone again." Mary Eunice's eyelashes fluttered, knuckles white where she gripped the side of the bathtub for support. "I'll get you some clothes. It's late. You need to rest." Lana folded a towel on the toilet and left the room.

As soon as her outline vanished from view, the shadows swam into haunting faces and demonic eyes and inhuman forms. Mary Eunice dove to the towel and wrapped it around herself and charged in a series of wet skids after her companion. She stood in the doorway where she could see Lana in front of a closet, picking through it, and there where she had her salvation in view, she attempted to dry herself in several harried swipes. Her lips trembled at the cold misery of all of this. She could not feel God here.

Lana turned and jumped at Mary Eunice's form in the doorway. "Jesus! You scared the hell out of me!" She shook her head and scooped up the things she had dropped. "I suppose that is in your job description." Mary Eunice didn't laugh; a confused frown remained wobbling upon her face, and twin tears rolled down her cheeks. Lana followed them with her eyes, torn on offering comfort. It was not her place. She was out of her element. Instead, she offered the heap of clothing to the weeping woman. "You can wear anything in the closet that fits you. I'm used to sharing." How many washes would take away the smell of Wendy's perfume forever?

Mary Eunice dabbed the tears out of her eyes with her thumb. "Thank you." She couldn't hold her words steady. They quivered with her lips and tongue. "Where—Where is my habit?" In the dark fabric she had cloaked herself to defend herself from the evils of the world, preserve her body for God. The habit gave her a sense of security that nothing else could mirror.

"It was destroyed in the exorcism," Lana said. Mary Eunice's tears fell a little faster, and she hurried to explain. "They brought nothing of yours. Just you. The Monsignor said it was a matter of utmost importance to remove you from the premises immediately. He said he would have your things delivered as soon as possible." Arching one eyebrow, she continued in a mutter, "He also thought an attending physician was optional, so how much he actually has vested in your wellbeing is a matter of opinion. But I'm inclined to hold him to his word." Lana studied Mary Eunice a moment longer. "Are you alright?" she ventured to ask, uncertain if she wanted to know the answer.

"I…" Mary Eunice swallowed hard. "I need to pray." She looked down at the clothing that Lana had given her, a long-sleeved T-shirt of a deep green shade and black sweatpants, plain white panties and a bra with too large cups. As she swayed on her feet, Lana caught her by the shoulder and guided her to sit on the bed. "I'm sorry," she apologized, head rocking loosely upon her neck. "I don't feel well."

"How long has it been since you ate anything?" Lana asked, fingers curling into the soft flesh of Mary Eunice's upper arm. Her collarbones protruded and her eyes looked haunted, sunken; she had clearly lost some weight, but the nun spent so much time buried beneath her habit that Lana had no way of gauging how much.

"I don't remember." Mary Eunice closed her eyes and waited for the world to stop spinning. "It's all—pieces." She shivered and hugged herself, doubling over at the middle. It hurts, she wanted to cry, but she bit her tongue, unable to identify the location of the weeping wound just beneath her flesh. Lana smoothed a comforting hand up the flat of her back, and she curled into the friendly touch, burying her face into her neck. "I'm afraid."

Lana's heart had already broken irreparably, but as the crumpled ball of a woman clung to her and wept, her belly wrenched with pity. "You're safe," she promised once again. She didn't know what else to say. "Sister," she began, and blue eyes lifted slowly to fix on her from below. "I
know I don't have much to offer you. But Wendy had several family heirlooms that she brought here. Her rosary and her Bible—among other things, I'm not sure what all. If that would make you feel better, you can have them. I don't have any use for them. Would you like that?

Mary Eunice blinked through her watery eyes. "I—I don't want to impose…"

Lana chuckled. "It's not an imposition, I promise." No more than being dumped on my doorstep, anyway. She plucked Mary Eunice's hand from the front of her shirt with a gentle insistence and then stood. Mary Eunice scrambled after her, prepared to follow, but Lana only went to the closet again, pulling a cardboard box from the top shelf. "Wendy wasn't practicing. You'll get a lot more out of these things than she ever did." Dust rose from the top of the box in a cloud when Lana dropped it in front of her on the floor. "I'm going to make us something to eat. Shout if you need something."

The bedside lamp was on, but even with the light, Lana's absence sent icy anxiety spiraling down her spine. She threw on the provided clothes and started to lift the box to take it with her, but the weight of it caused her to flop backward in dizziness. She pulled the rosary from it instead and left it there at the foot of the bed before she tiptoed after Lana, clutching the sacred beads like a weapon against all of the evil that peered upon her.

Light exhaled from the kitchen, and Mary Eunice sat in the living room adjacent where she could watch Lana work, could hear the sounds of a spray can and smell the scents of butter warming in a pan. It was there that she lifted the rosary to her lips and felt safe enough to begin her quietly mumbled prayer. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth…"

At the sound of Mary Eunice's whispered words, Lana lifted her head from the bread that she had begun to butter and watched. She had expected the nun to remain in solitude, in privacy. Watching her felt like intruding. With pursed lips, she turned away and scraped out the tomato paste into the pot on the stove, mixing it with milk and stirring furiously. She desperately wanted another cup of coffee, but with the late hour and a guest in her home, she knew that she needed to attempt to sleep. I don't think either one of us is going to rest easily tonight, she suspected, the pit of her gut sinking.

Some of her words were more familiar than others, and occasionally, Lana glanced over her shoulder to ensure that Mary Eunice hadn't moved from her position on the sofa. The more she prayed, the more her posture relaxed, her shoulders slumping slightly, hands stilling from the quivers that had shaken them since she arrived. The prayer veiled her in a sense of safety. Seeing her lose the tension that had plagued her since her awakening allowed Lana to release the breath that she had been holding.

Fat tears rolled down Mary Eunice's cheeks, and Lana brought her a box of tissues and placed it on the coffee table without interrupting. She put on the two cheese sandwiches and grilled them, one slightly more burnt than the other. She put that one on her own plate and poured herself a glass of wine. Then she returned to stirring the soup.

When Mary Eunice blew her nose, it sounded like a trumpeting elephant, and Lana took the sound to indicate that she had finished praying. "Food's done," she called. "What do you want to drink? I've got wine and cola."

"I just want water."

"Care for a chocolate?"

"No, thank you." Mary Eunice ducked her head. "Sister Jude says sweets lead to sin," she mumbled under her breath, but at the words, Lana inclined an eyebrow. "I'm not allowed."
"Sister Jude says a lot of things." Lana poured her a glass of water regardless. "With what you've been through, I don't think she would hold a candy bar against your eternal soul." She poured two bowls of soup. "Then again, having become far too well-acquainted with Sister Jude for my own good… She probably wouldn't be incredibly forgiving."

Mary Eunice stared at the sandwich on her plate. "I cannot afford indulgence now," she murmured. "I must cleanse and purify myself…"

Lana ogled at her for a moment. You can't be serious, she wanted to say. Cleanse and purify after all you've endured? Self-imposed punishment for a crime you did not commit? She sucked her teeth to prevent any of that from coming out. Catholics really are nutters. "It's not your fault, Sister," she said instead.

"A possession is a matter of personal, spiritual weakness." She stared at the sandwich like she expected it to change colors, unwilling to miss a single detail of its crust. "I must accept the consequences of my sins."

Lana frowned in disapproval, but she had nothing more to say on the matter. She had no authority to speak upon it. She placed the bowl of soup in front of the nun and sat across the table from her. "There's a parish down the road from here. I can take you there tomorrow if you like." Spooning up the tomato soup, she sipped it, hoping it tasted like something more than red water. It was hardly a meal that Wendy would have claimed, but it was edible. She dipped her grilled cheese in the soup and ate it in nibbles.

"I—I don't want to put you out." Mary Eunice ate with more modesty that Lana expected, napkin in her lap, dabbing at her mouth like she attended a much fancier occasion.

"It's no bother. I hardly have anything else to do." Writing that book would be a start. Her stomach curled whenever she thought of the typewriter in her office. She had written only a single article since she emerged from Briarcliff, a short piece discussing her absence from the paper in vague detail; the vagueness didn't matter. Everyone knew her now, the journalist who had saved the community by killing Bloody Face. The editor said she could have as much time as she needed. She wasn't certain she would ever be ready to return to her old life.

"You're very kind, Lana." Mary Eunice picked the crust off of her bread like a child. The sight of it drew a smile upon Lana's exhausted face. "Why… Why did you bring me here?"

The question startled her from her reverie. "I—" That's a goddamn good question, actually. Her mouth dried suddenly, and she sipped her wine in the hope that it would loosen her tongue. "The Monsignor said he didn't know where else you would go. Dr. Arden had offered his home, but he gives me the creeps." At the mention of his name, Mary Eunice blanched. Lana stirred her soup. The steam curled gray in the air, and she inhaled it the scent of it, comforting, like awakening to her mother's cooking. "And…" And I'm scared shitless to live here by myself. Lana was not in the business of admitting her own fears. "Well, that's it, actually."

Mary Eunice's hands trembled. She had wrapped the rosary around one hand and squeezed it. "Thank you." She pushed her spoon around in her soup but didn't drink any of it. "Dr. Arden is not—I would not have—" She shuddered and fell silent, face screwed up against memories. The sweet taste of the caramel apple, his sickening smile just beyond—things she had experienced while sane. The heavy dangling weight of gaudy earrings, his expression much more pensive—things she had experienced through the orange eyes of a demonic entity. The shimmering memories faded into snippets. Would they all eventually come back to her? She didn't want them to. She didn't want to know all that she had done with that monster inside her.

"Yeah, I get it. He's one freaky bastard." Mary Eunice watched as Lana poured herself more wine
and drank. "How did somebody like you end up in a freak show like that? I mean, you could've been off somewhere reading to children or something. Living in a normal abbey with normal folks. How did you get dropped off on the doorstep at bedlam with Sister Horrible?"

"Mother Superior appointed me to Briarcliff after I took my vows. Sister Jude said that I could benefit from working there—that I would learn something more about real service." Mary Eunice sipped her own water. "I cannot help where I am placed by God."

Lana finished the last nibble of her sandwich and stood to wash her plate at the sink. "Sister, I don't know much about religion. But I think if there was ever a godless place, it's that asylum." Mary Eunice didn't answer, still eating in tiny bites with that same hollow look upon her face. Lana emptied the bottle of wine into her glass, and as she started toward the doorway, Mary Eunice began to shovel her food in a series of rapid gulps, frightened of letting Lana out of sight. "Don't choke yourself," she dissuaded. "I'm not going anywhere."

An embarrassed heat rose to Mary Eunice's cheeks. Internally scolding herself, she slowed her desperate attempt at keeping pace with her companion. But the loneliness came with its own threats, the moving shadows forming faces she did not want to see. If she kept Lana nearby, she could hold out. If she kept Lana beside her, perhaps the gap within her would fill.

The rosary felt like a string of beads in her hand. It held no sacrilege. Her prayers were just words, just empty ritual. Where had God gone? She drank the tasteless soup in long swallows, reluctant to keep Lana waiting. Without the veil of heavenly light to protect her, she fell to her weaknesses, the sins that had plagued her before she turned to the church. You're weak. God does not desert His children. It is your duty to seek Him. She needed counsel. But who could she possibly involve? Who would believe her? Even if she confessed to a priest, how far back would she have to go to possibly explain all that had happened at Briarcliff?

"Are you alright, Sister?" Lana's voice plucked her out of her reverie like an apple pulled from a bucket of water between a child's teeth.

A wry, unhappy smile tittered upon her face. "I… I don't even know how I could answer that honestly, Lana." She took her plate to the kitchen and washed it and dried it, putting it away like she had watched the other do. "What time is it?"

"It's almost midnight."

She hesitated a moment, and then she asked, "What day is it?" in a somewhat meeker tone.

Lana exhaled a breathy laugh. "It's Monday, September twentieth." She downed the rest of her wine and washed out the glass. "The world went on without us in it. It's surreal how much time has passed." Mary Eunice lowered her gaze to the floor and didn't respond. Lana touched her elbow. "We both should get some sleep. You can have the bed." Mary Eunice's lips immediately fluttered into protest, but Lana silenced her. "No offense, Sister, but you look like you've got one foot in the grave. I would hardly live up to my promises if I dumped you on the couch now."

"I don't want to be by myself." The words tumbled out of Mary Eunice's mouth in a quick slur before she could dare to stuff them back in. She pinched her bottom lip between her teeth and closed her eyes in shame. "I—I'm sorry—you don't have to—I didn't mean—" Her tongue flapped in useless stammers, so she quieted it and said nothing more. If she couldn't manage a coherent thought, she could at least remain silent.

"It's fine," Lana assured. "I understand." She did understand. She understood so well that the sight of Mary Eunice shaking like a leaf in front of her made her want to wrap them both in blankets in front of a fire with hot chocolate and never leave the safety of a swaddle again. They deserved
better than the fear and the memories that surfaced when they slept. "I'll stay with you." Lana awkwardly extended one arm with a smile to Mary Eunice, an invitation that she wasn't sure the nun would take.

Mary Eunice needed no encouragement to burrow herself into Lana's arms. "Thank you," she breathed. She squeezed tightly around her middle, not entirely sure that she could separate herself from the embrace.

Lana closed her eyes. At the fervor with which Mary Eunice seized her, she wondered, How long has it been since someone touched her? Her instinct wanted to smooth a hand over her hair, but she resisted. "Let's get some sleep. Really." She guided her back to the bedroom and took the side of the bed that she had always occupied. The weight on the mattress was different than when Wendy had slept beside her. "Do you want me to leave the light on?"

A moment of hesitance passed before she decided in a shaky voice, "N-No, I'll be fine." She rolled over to face Lana until the darkness consumed both of them with a flick of the lamp.

Lana lay on her back, face up to the ceiling. She had always been a stomach-sleeper, but her breasts and abdomen were too tender for her to put that much weight upon them; she did not like to consider the why behind those symptoms. She hadn't made an appointment yet, and she knew that she needed to before it was too late. The idea of some person forking metal things into her body disgusted her, repulsed her, only slightly less than the concept of bringing Baby Thredson into the world. Baby Thredson. The title caused her stomach to whirl.

The bed shook in a great roll, and Mary Eunice hurled an arm over her middle and dropped her head heavily upon Lana's shoulder. "Sister—" sputtered Lana for a moment. "What the hell?" The sleeping woman answered her with a snore against her cheek.

I should wake her up. This was not part of the job description. But with eyelashes against her cheek and the occasional wheezing snore indicating deeper peace than Mary Eunice had known for weeks, Lana did not have the heart to interrupt and embarrass her. She wriggled one arm up from between them and draped it over her shoulders. "I don't even like you very much," she muttered. "I just really—really needed a friend." She turned her head and bumped her nose against Mary Eunice's forehead. "Well, this is uncomfortable."

Still, with the warm breath and the heartbeat there beside her, Lana eased herself into a sense of security much more easily, and her eyes fell closed without her consent. Lulled into peace at last, Lana found herself drawn into a dreamless sleep.
By Night In a Pillar of Fire

Chapter Notes

Chapter title: Exodus 13:21

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The room still wore its dark cloak when Sister Mary Eunice opened her eyes to slits. For a bewildering moment, she hadn't a clue where she was, and she tensed upon the mattress, heart leaping into her throat, but when Lana shifted beneath her with a sleeping slur, all of the memories rushed back to her with clarity. "Lana?" The soft croak of her own voice startled her, and she bit her lip as Lana didn't stir anymore. Their bodies cradled together in the blankets, Mary Eunice wondered how they had drawn so close together in their sleep, her head resting in the crook between Lana's neck and shoulder, Lana's arms tossed around her shoulders and over her body in a haphazard tangle of limbs.

Lana's skin exhaled a sweet, milky scent, like cookies coming out of the oven. Mary Eunice bit her lip as she took a measured breath to calm her throbbing, rapid pulse; it didn't take her more than a moment to ease back into the sense of safety with which she had fallen asleep. Each time she blinked, her eyelashes brushed against Lana's cheek, and she tasted Lana's every breath across her nostrils, the air between them sticky and sweet. The shared covers bunched around their chins. I shouldn't. This is indulgence. But Mary Eunice could not remember the last time that anyone person had touched her for so long, had endured her foolish presence and allowed her a shred of fickle dreaming. Lana held her like a sister, and in the embrace, the shadows did not crawl with hateful eyes and demonic souls.

With eyes closed, Mary Eunice managed to lull herself into a meditative, peaceful state to the rhythm of Lana's audible heartbeat and the even rise-fall of her chest. But as she tasted the edge of sleep once again, Lana grunted. "Mm." Her arm drew from beneath Mary Eunice's body. "Roll o'er. M' arm's asleep. Time t' switch." And in a great flop, she hurled herself on top of Mary Eunice. All of the air rushed out of her lungs in an audible whoosh as Lana nuzzled up warmly against her. "Night," Lana grumbled, half-asleep.

"Good night," Mary Eunice answered, somewhat perplexed by Lana's behavior. She found one arm pinned beneath Lana's body, but she didn't dare remove it; the proximity it granted protected her.

A long, slow breath passed from Lana's nostrils, and for a long moment, Mary Eunice thought that she had fallen asleep, but her face moved once more in a single twitch. "Love you, Wendy."

Oh, no. Mary Eunice's heart sank to the pit of her stomach and lower still, plummeting through her like a hiker falling into the abyss. She swallowed hard against the budding lump in her throat and the tears that threatened, swimming behind her eyelids. What could she possibly say? "Lana, I…" As she grappled for the right words—as if any words could ever be right—Lana's breath evened out into sleep again, and Mary Eunice stared at the top of her head, wondering about all of the holes that Thredson must have left inside Lana. The demon had left gaps inside Mary Eunice, places where God had once been and now could not occupy, pain that she didn't know how to numb. Had Thredson done the same to Lana? Given a human face to a demonic entity before shredding another innocent soul?
The rhythmic hum of Lana's breath, in and out in a steady purr, comforted her; the crickets whirred outside, but not nearly as loud as they did at Briarcliff, where her cracked window overlooked the forest and let in drafts around the frame all winter long. Her chamber at Briarcliff made Lana's home look luxurious, carpeted and decorative with showers that spewed water at a comfortable temperature and furniture that wasn't handed down from the prison. She could not allow herself to become acquainted with the luxury of this life. Soon enough, her true calling would reclaim her. God would want her back; He alone had never left her, had always cherished and protected her, and she had failed Him when she allowed that entity into her body. People would leave. The Lord was eternal. This was passing, as momentary as the breath in her lungs, soon to be exhaled.

As soon as she fell asleep, a nightmare consumed her. A man with black teeth swallowed her, and as she tumbled down into the pit of his stomach, his acidic blood scalded her, and she scraped her knees on hot coals. In floating bubbles, her reflection glowed back at her, but her pale skin had turned to gray scales and a split, snake-like tongue flicked from between her lips, and her yellow, feline eyes gleamed. She stumbled away from the horrific mirror and backed into the heaving, fleshy wall.

The beast spewed her back out on a wave of inky oil and hurled into the cold stone floors of Briarcliff. No, no, stop, she wailed internally, but she could not control her own strides as the demon's whispers nearly drowned out her own voice, Latin mutters in violent snarls. Her stone cold face reflected the demon's impassivity, but her soul was weeping. The Mexican, Clara, murmured her prayers audibly in her cell. "Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo. Santificado sea tu nombre."

Sister Mary Eunice hesitated outside to listen to her continue. The demon licked her lips, and hunger boiled in her belly. She wanted to kill the woman. She needed a soul to devour. Who better than the most faithful to victimize? She could exhibit her power. Who would miss the Mexican? Who would suspect the naive Sister Mary Eunice to have murdered her?

No one, the nun knew. Frozen in the back of her own head like a dusty box in an attic, she could not resist the demon's every step. "Venga tu reino. Hágase tu voluntad en la tierra como en el cielo." Don't hurt her! She's praying!

Shut up, silly girl! The harsh bark sent her reeling back into her silence. Each time she struggled, everything burned andsmarted and ached, and she had no rest. The demon did not allow her to sleep. Through eyes like tunnels, she could only spectate in horror as her body entered the cell. The door whined and clanged shut. Her own distinctive voice purred, "Why are you so fearful, my child?"

Clara tensed upon the bed and wrapped her rosary tighter around her hands. Her eyes fluttered into several blinks, and she could not still the trembling of her limbs. Her hair had fluffed into a black, kinky frizz. "Alejate, el Satanás! Alejate!" The words did not prevent her from stepping nearer, nearer. The terrified woman recoiled.

Then, with a shriek, she thrust the crucifix into Mary Eunice's face. She smacked it away with a smirk. It clattered onto the floor. "I can't imagine what you're so afraid of." Clara curled up away from the possessed woman, shielding her face with her hands. "Get on your knees, and we'll pray it all away." Stammering and rocking herself, the patient shook her head. Her cheeks were moist in the wrinkles from the tears and sweat she shed.

In a rich bellow that burned her throat hoarse, Mary Eunice snarled, "Ponte de rodillas!" Spittle flew from her mouth and decorated the dry, stale air in glimmering drops. Clara scrambled down upon the floor and knelt by the bed, leaving the blankets in a heap upon the floor.
As Clara sobbed, she pleaded, "El diablo! El diablo, ahorrame!" She grappled upon the ground for the discarded rosary. The demon kicked it farther under the bed, out of reach, and seized Clara by the back of her shirt. "Suelteame, por favor!" Though Sister Mary Eunice did not speak Spanish, she understood every word, each plea for Clara's life. Please don't do this, please, she whimpered internally, but the demon ignored her—if it heard her at all.

The demon dropped the woman to the floor upon her knees. "Repite," she ordered, shooting a dark look to the sniveling mortal. "Padre en el cielo, la fuente eterna de todo el bueno." Voice shaking like a leaf, Clara repeated the words. The blade of a knife protruded against Mary Eunice's thigh where the demon had stored it for this sacrifice. "Mantennos fieles en su servicio."

With each shaking word, Clara's death drew nearer. Mary Eunice lifted the knife from her skirt. And as Clara finished her prayer, brown eyes shifting over to the nun, she sprang. She blinded the patient in a fell swoop and stabbed her in the neck. No! I don't want to! Stop! No matter how she grappled for the reins, Mary Eunice did not have the strength to release the woman from her own grip. Blood sprayed in a jet across her face and stained her habit.

Mary Eunice sat bolt upright in bed with a gasp. Light streamed in through window. The plush blankets were tucked in around her. At the memory of the dream, her stomach clenched and whirled. I did it. I killed Clara. I killed her. She shuddered all over, acutely aware of cool layer of sweat that caused her clothing to cling to her body. Stains of it stuck under her arms and along her back.

Plucking the fabric from her body, she swung her legs over the side of the bed. The world spun around her in dizzy circles dotted with black circles. Each time she blinked, Clara's face was imprinted on the back of her eyelids, stamped into her brain. She leaned upon the wall for support. "Lana?" she called out in a quivering voice.

No sooner than she uttered the word, a loud retching echoed from the bathroom. Mary Eunice straightened and jogged into the open doorframe. "Lana?" Lana had crouched in front of the toilet bowl, losing her guts into it. Her hair dangled in front of her face where rivulets of sweat trickled down. All thoughts of the dream forgotten, Mary Eunice dove forward to pull her hair back and pressed a hand to the small of her back, rubbing in tight circles to soothe her. Once the spewing had ceased, she ventured, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Lana croaked. "Too much wine last night." She belched and rested her sweaty cheek on the cool of the toilet bowl. Mary Eunice stood and warmed a washcloth in the sink before she dropped back down and mopped Lana's face with gentle strokes. Lana's brown eyes lazily fluttered. "Really, I'm fine."

It wasn't that much wine, Mary Eunice wanted to debate, concerned frown upon her lips, but something else tinged beneath the surface of her mind, a memory that she couldn't quite reach. "You feel warm. Maybe you should lie down for a bit," she said instead.

Lana upstartled too quickly at that suggestion. "No, no, I'm fine," she insisted. As soon as she stood, she staggered and swooned, eyes glazed, and Mary Eunice caught her by the front of her shirt and lowered her back to the floor. "I'm fine," she mumbled, but her voice had a slight slur to it. "I'm just a little light-headed. I'm fine."

Biting her lip, Mary Eunice scanned Lana's face, uncertain how to continue. Lana didn't want to admit her illness to her for some reason that she could not fathom, but while Mary Eunice didn't want to challenge her, she also couldn't allow Lana to harm herself. "You nearly fainted. You're not fine," she pointed out, tone probing.

"I just need a moment." Lana closed her eyes, and Mary Eunice settled beside her. She would not
leave Lana's side until she knew she was safe and well. The stench of the mingling vomit and sweat did not disturb her; she had spent far too long groveling in things equally terrible at Briarcliff to allow them to faze her now. "Are you alright?"

"Me?"

"You were whimpering in your sleep. I started to wake you up, but I got—distracted." An uncomfortable silence followed. "Well?"

"It—it was just a bad dream." Mary Eunice averted her eyes at the lie and pinched at the flesh of her forearm. The pain grounded her and allowed her to feel real. "It's over now." It would never be over. She could never unsee Clara lying there on the ground, writhing, blood pouring out of the gaping wound in her neck. I killed her. She shivered all over once as goosebumps rose on her skin. Lana placed a hand upon her elbow, sympathy etched upon the creases of her face. "I still think you should lie down."

Lana sighed, averting her eyes. "You're probably right." With Mary Eunice's help, she stood upon rubbery legs. "Thanks. I've got it—you don't have to hold me up. I can walk." Mary Eunice didn't exactly trust her word, but she reluctantly relinquished her hold upon her to let her walk herself back to the bed.

"Do you want me to get you some water and crackers?" she offered as she plucked up the covers over Lana until the other woman batted her hands away, and abashed, she took a step back to keep herself from worrying over Lana more profusely. "Sorry."

Lana snorted, a smile touching her clammy face. "Could you..." She hesitated, reluctant to ask anything else of Mary Eunice. Mary Eunice waited patiently for her orders; she was in her element now. She could serve better than almost anyone else. Sister Jude's careful, tyrannical training had ensured that. "Could I have a glass of water and a pickle?"

A pickle? You were just vomiting. Mary Eunice wanted to object, but she nodded. "Of course." The agreement came more easily than she had expected it; Lana's request made sense to her, somewhere beneath all the confusion, and she worried at her lip as she fought to work through the hazy memories of the past few months. Each face passed like a shadow in snippets. She leapt from stone to stone in her memory; the blankness surrounding was a torrenting river. If she lost her grip, she would fall and drown in the empty gaps.

In the kitchen, she filled a glass with ice and water and looked for a pickle jar in the cabinets. Through the haze that comprised her memory, she looked for Lana's face. She remembered Lana arriving at the asylum, her own stupidity in showing the journalist the secret passage where Dr. Ardan stored his experiments. Afterward? Afterward was a blur. Clara's death stood out in a stark contrast from the other smears. Where had she last seen Lana?

They were in a dark, stone hallway, passing by one another. Lana had a haggard expression, hair hanging in sweaty strings, and her eyes glittered with a watery betrayal. "It was you." What was me? What did I do? But as her soul surged to the surface, desperate to communicate with Lana, desperate to break free, desperate to beg for forgiveness, the demon squashed her back down, and her ears rang a shrill note. Lana's mouth shivered into movement, but she could not discern the words, wailing internally—

And there was Clara, blood jetting from the gaping wound in her neck, derailing Mary Eunice's train of thought with a stroke of her terrified eyes. The flash of the dying woman sent Mary Eunice stumbling backward; she spilled the water all over the floor and dropped a stack of plastic bowls from the cabinet. Heart in her throat, she scrambled to clean it all up. She had wronged Lana in some way, she knew, but how could she ever ask for forgiveness when she could not
remember the transgression? Was it her place to ask for elaboration? Would Lana grant her those memories? *Do I even want to know?*

She did want to know. She wanted to know so badly, like an itch that she couldn't reach as it festered and reddened with irritation. Her innumerable sins multiplied every time she delved into her memory. But the *not knowing* made her capacity for evil an abyss. "Pickles," she reminded herself. "Pickles." Her cheeks burned with tears, and she rubbed them away with the back of her hand.

Refilling the water glass, she found the pickle jar in the refrigerator and picked through it to find one that hadn't gone soft. She wrapped it in a paper towel and brought Lana's request back to the bedroom. As she passed by the furniture in the living room, she noted the layer of dust that coated Lana's house; the carpet shed lots of hair that stuck to the bottoms of her bare feet. Perhaps she could begin her recompense by helping Lana get her house clean again. It had gone without an inhabitant for months since Wendy died.

*Wendy.* The thought of the woman, the one Mary Eunice had never met, sent her eyes to the pictures on the walls as she considered Lana's sleepily mumbled words from the night before. In the images, Lana looked so happy, clinging to Wendy. They shared wide grins, hands all tangled up in one another's, hair tossed gloriously to the wind.

She bustled by the images upon the wall before she could allow herself to linger on thoughts. Lana reclined in the bed with a book in her hands. She brightened a little as Mary Eunice entered the room. "Thanks." She took a large crunching bite out of the pickle. "Mm. This is the best pickle I've had in, like, years." Chewing in big gulps, she watched as Mary Eunice took her rosary from the box and wrapped it around her wrists. "Hey—what's the matter?"

"I wouldn't dream of interrupting." Lana lifted up her book again. "You can put the cross on the wall if you want. Anywhere there's space."

"That's generous of you, Lana, but it's not my place to alter your home." She regarded the other woman for a moment as Lana chewed thoughtfully on the pickle, shrugging off her words. Mary Eunice knelt down beside the bed and closed her eyes with her hands clasped. The position sent her spiraling back into the memories when Clara crouched beside her, whimpering and sniveling. Her breath caught in her throat, and she straightened her back. The position felt irreverent now, even poised upon the shag carpet.

Lana's gaze caused goosebumps to prickle upon the back of her neck. Her lips quivered, and she worked the pad of her thumb over the crucifix to hold her intentions fast in her mind. With diligent rhythm, she made the Sign of the Cross and began to silently mouth the words. Through her mind, they rang like song, like a lullaby; they never failed to soothe her. But while the routine of praying her rosary comforted her, the gap within Mary Eunice's heart quivered. God's love had not returned to her. Without it, the words were empty. She prayed them anyway.

Lana watched Sister Mary Eunice pray for a long moment as an uncomfortable ripple worked its way up from her abdomen to her chest. She felt like a peeping tom, eyeing the private moment of the other woman, but she couldn't tear her gaze away. Mary Eunice prayed so fervently, pink lips sliding over one another in silent words. Through her mind, they rang like song, like a lullaby; they never failed to soothe her. But while the routine of praying her rosary comforted her, the gap within Mary Eunice's heart quivered. God's love had not returned to her. Without it, the words were empty. She prayed them anyway.

In spite of herself, judgment prickled inside Lana. *That's rather disconcerting.* She averted her
eyes and returned to her book, but she couldn't focus long enough to read it. Her mind had scrambled into hiccups since Mary Eunice caught her vomiting. Mary Eunice didn't remember that she was pregnant, and Lana wanted to keep it that way. Her life and plans were more easily executed without a moral battle with her newly adopted roommate. She just had to make the appointment and spin a convincing lie. Mary Eunice would never suspect. In her naivete, Lana found safety.

What was she dreaming about? Lana couldn't help but wonder while she stared blankly at the page of her novel. Her rabid curiosity had led her into so much trouble, but she still chased it in speculation. Mary Eunice's mumblings had sounded almost foreign, like Spanish. Did she speak Spanish? Somehow, Lana doubted that. But what do I know? She knew nothing about Mary Eunice, not even her surname. Regardless, the dream had sounded unpleasant.

Sipping at her water, she skimmed the page of the dumb romance novel that she had selected. It had Wendy's name written in the front cover and worn pages from the number of times that she had turned them in her life, but holding it did not make Lana feel any nearer to her. Reading the words gave her no piece of Wendy that she had otherwise missed. Her eyes drifted closed. She could have sworn last night that she had awoken in Wendy's arms. But when she opened her eyes in new light, she had her back to Mary Eunice, who slept flat on her back like a pale corpse in a coffin.

Part of her regretted that she and Mary Eunice had severed gradually through the night, but part of her was glad that she didn't have to explain herself upon awakening, didn't have to stammer out excuses and fibs about actions that she couldn't control in her sleep. For the first time in weeks, Lana had had a dreamless sleep, and if she hadn't awoken with her stomach in a thousand knots, she almost would have called it a beautiful morning.

Lana downed the rest of her water. Shit, I need to fix lunch. I need to take a shower. I smell gross. My mouth tastes like piss. She swung over the side of the bed and padded across the floor on cat's feet; she would not interrupt Mary Eunice's prayers for the sake of telling her that she needed to take a leak. The dizzy feeling returned to her head, but it faded a little when she splashed her face with cool water. Her haggard reflection gazed back at her, empty eyes, protruding bones where she had been starved inside the asylum, scars on her temples that still occasionally caused lapses in her memory. Is that a gray hair? She plucked at the strand of silver sprouting from her scalp. I look like a hobo.

In the mirror, where she had left the bathroom door open, she noticed that Mary Eunice had scooted farther down the bed and glanced up from her prayers every few moments to ensure that Lana was still in sight. Christ, we're both mentally fucked. Lana brushed through her hair and tied it back in a ponytail. She had never adorned herself too heavily with makeup, but upon eyeing her own gaunt face, she found herself reaching for the products in some effort to mask the crippling exhaustion that leaked from her very soul.

At the first smear across her skin, she realized how pale she had become from the months spent in Briarcliff's seclusion with no access to the sun. Her old foundation no longer matched her skin tone. She wiped it off with a washcloth and hurled it into the dirty clothes. Then, she washed her face more thoroughly and studied her bitten nails—a habit she had acquired in college and banished after she and Wendy moved to Boston together. It had returned in Briarcliff like the rest of her demons.

After she brushed her teeth, she emerged from the bathroom and waited for Mary Eunice to finish praying; it was only a few minutes before her whisper grew louder in a pronunciation of her final prayer: "...through the same Christ Our Lord. Amen." She lingered a moment before she unwove the rosary from around her hand and stood slowly. She pushed it into her pocket so the beads
protruded a little, and her index finger traced them with enduring reverence.

"What do you want for lunch?" Lana smiled at her, an empty expression. Mary Eunice had tears on her cheeks that she dabbed away with her fingertips, and Lana pretended not to have noticed them; she could offer no solace against whatever spiritual upheaval Mary Eunice was experiencing. "I could order us a pizza. Or I can try to cook, but my ability to set things on fire goes unprecedented. It comes with the risk of leaving us both homeless."

A genuine smile cracked Mary Eunice's face at those purred words. Her blue eyes lit up, and her full cheeks rose with a slight blush across them. "You don't have to cook for me, Lana. I can make something. I'm not helpless." They headed into the kitchen together, Lana leading the way, Mary Eunice walking immediately in her footsteps. "What are you in the mood for?"

Lana was already pulling the pickle jar out of the fridge and prying it open. "Uh… I think I've got the stuff for chicken and noodles. If the chicken isn't out of date, anyway. Would you like a pickle?"

"No, thank you." Mary Eunice found the packs of chicken in the freezer and unwrapped the packages. "This looks fine to me." She turned to wash her hands in the sink.

Lana munched into the pickle in one hand and dragged the chicken closer to her with the other. "Cool, cool. I can fry this if you can put the noodles on to boil." Mary Eunice nodded and took down a pot without a second guess; if Lana's idea of chicken and noodles involved fried chicken, she had no objections to make against it, though the idea sounded odd to her. *These cravings are murder*, Lana griped internally. *Fried chicken with pasta? Simply nonsensical.*

She sliced the chicken breasts into strips and breaded them before she dropped them into the frying pan on the stove with the oil and covered it with a glass lid, preoccupied with stuffing her face with another pickle; they tasted fresh and crisp and wholesome, and while the stubborn kinks of her brain wanted to deny the parasite within her even the slightest control over her life, she couldn't resist the urge to shove another one into her mouth. *I deserve it. I look like a walking skeleton.* She looked up at Mary Eunice. *We both do.* Mary Eunice filled the pot of pasta with water, ignorant to Lana's prying gaze, and put it on the stove.

Lana turned her back to the food on the stove. "You were right. This is better than pizza." She eyed the pickle jar. *No, that's enough. Three pickles in one day is more than sufficient. You're about to eat lunch.* To prevent herself from ogling, she stuck the jar back in the refrigerator. Mary Eunice's pensive expression fixed on the empty wall above the sink. Her lips tilted downward at the corners in a thoughtful frown. "Sister?"

Interrupted from her thoughts, Mary Eunice jerked back to face Lana, surprise coloring her cheeks as her blue eyes dashed with light. "I—I'm alright." She hugged herself and folded at the middle into a crumple, like her spine caved. The pink of her lips trembled. Lana shuffled nearer and placed a delicate hand upon her bicep, and Mary Eunice averted her eyes to the floor, avoiding her gaze. "I can't remember anything. I want to, but it's all—blurred. The pieces don't fit together, like they're not part of the same puzzle, or I'm trying to make the wrong picture…" She dashed at the corner of her eyes where moisture had begun to collect. "Lana, did I—" Her dark voice hiccuped with nervousness. "Did I hurt you? I see your face, and I hear your voice, but it doesn't make any sense. I was too consumed to make anything of it—I was too weak…"

Lana squeezed her arm, but her tongue didn't leap to the occasion as she expected. *You were a tyrant, she wanted to say. You released Bloody Face and hired him as Briarcliff staff. You saw the genitals of this thing inside me and celebrated my failure. You had Jude's brains fried in electroshock therapy. You were a fucking monster, Mary Eunice.* "No," she lied, smooth and graceful. "You've done nothing to me."
The truth would have tasted so sweet, but the tortured twist upon the nun's face sent Lana's stomach into anxious flips. "You had no control over your actions, sister. I know that. You need to accept it, as well. You weren't to blame." Those words had a bitter flavor. So badly, Lana yearned to place the blame in a proverbial game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, to slap the shame upon the most available villain and shower them in her rage and her hatred. But life had never come in such easy brands of black and white, good and bad, and Mary Eunice had less evil in her whole body than Lana had in her left leg, than Bloody Face had carried in his little toe.

As another plump tear rolled down Mary Eunice's cheek, Lana resisted the urge to dab it away. She held her gaze with honesty and, after a brief hesitation, she opened her arms in an invitation for a hug. Mary Eunice dove into it with such force that Lana bumped against the back of the counter and struggled to keep herself upright. "I'm so sorry." Uttered between wet sniffles, the words quivered with utter despondency. "I never meant to hurt anyone."

Lana smoothed a hand up her back. "It's okay." She rested her chin on Mary Eunice's shoulder. "It's really okay. I promise. You don't have to cry." Let her. She needs it. Lana had learned to appreciate a good cry, but unlike Mary Eunice, she preferred hers in solitude and silence where no one could observe her and mock her weakness. "It's okay, Sister."

Mary Eunice choked on the thick swelling in her throat. Every attempt she made to stifle the tears made them surge forward tenfold. Lana's skinny arms and bony body granted her a reprieve that she didn't deserve, and she hid her face in the crook of her neck in shame. I killed Clara, but the words stuck behind the lump in her throat and refused to bridge the gap between her tongue and the air, a confession she could not make so long as it jeopardized the safety that she had found in Lana's brief friendship. I'm an indulgent sinner. "I'm sorry," she repeated, uncertain if she spoke to Lana or to God.

"You don't have anything to apologize for," Lana assuaged. Her hand curled through Mary Eunice's soft golden hair; the gentle tugs at her scalp reminded her of the days when she was small and Aunt Celest would braid her hair before church. If you only knew. "I can smell the chicken burning. C'mon, let me go. I can fill you up with wine, and we can both have a good cry tonight over a sappy record." Lana tore off a paper towel for her, and Mary Eunice took it and blew her nose.

Once she trusted her voice not to shake, Mary Eunice gulped down the remaining lump in her throat. "I'm not allowed to drink outside of communion. Sister Jude says it defiles the sacrament."

Lana inclined her eyebrows with an ironic smile curling into her cheek. "If Sister Jude told you that walking insulted God, you would crawl to every destination, I swear it."

Mary Eunice turned her back to Lana to throw away the paper towel, racking her brain for a response, but she couldn't construct one; Lana's words held a note of embarrassing truth. As she faced Lana again, her red-rimmed eyes scanned the scene once, Lana's hand extended to the glass lid covering the pan, wrapped around the knob on top. "No—don't!"

"What?" As she removed the lid, the flames leapt upward out of the frying pan. "Holy shit!" The heat scorched their faces. Mary Eunice flung the cabinets open. Baking soda, baking soda—Lana grappled the pot of boiling water by the handle and tipped it precariously toward the grease fire.

Mary Eunice scrambled back toward her. "No!" She snatched the pot back away from Lana. The liquid sloshed out across her front. The scalding heat caused her to lose her grip. Noodles and water and pot clattered to the floor in a lumpy, hot mess as the steam mingled with the smoke. A hiss of protest sizzled between her teeth as she reflexively touched the burned spot on her stomach, but she could give it no consideration. "Smother it—Smother it!"
Lana grabbed a dry pot from above and attempted to cover the flames; she buried her face in the crook of her arm to shield herself from the smoke. Mary Eunice took the brief moment to kill the stove and grappled about for baking soda in the cabinet. She found the box of salt first and ripped it open, dumping the whole thing over the leaping fire, and then doubled back for the baking soda. She poured it over the pan, as well.

Through the gray haze of smoke, Mary Eunice gazed at Lana's silhouette. They exchanged weak coughs like small talk, eyes and noses streaming. Lana acted first; she opened the kitchen window, and watching her languid movement, calm like a cool breeze after a storm, made Mary Eunice shiver. The white hot flare of pain sent her pressing a hand to the steaming wet spot on the front of her clothes. She grimaced and pinched her eyes closed.

"Let me see." Lana led her by the arm out of the smoke-filled kitchen into the living room, where she could see a little more clearly. "Lie down." Mary Eunice saw no reason to argue and obediently reclined on the sofa. She struggled to pluck the fabric up, but it clung to her flesh. Wincing, Lana batted her hands away, and she relinquished them. As Lana took up the ends of the shirt, Mary Eunice bit her knuckles. With a delicate touch, Lana peeled the shirt off of the burned skin. "I think we should go to the hospital."

Mary Eunice peeked at the flushed skin; already it had turned dark red and wept, the appearance flaky and swollen. A hospital? She blanched at the thought of it. "I—I don't want to," she stammered. You sound like a child, she berated herself internally.

Under Lana's studious gaze, Mary Eunice shrank. "Alright." Lana stood and opened the living room window before the smoke and stench could become more stifling. "You should take a bath—a cold one. Put some antibiotic cream on it and bandage it."

With this advice, Mary Eunice soon found herself sinking into a tub of positively frigid water. She had left the door open so that she could hear Lana walking around through the house spraying an air freshener. The whole house reeked of burnt chicken, and as her body wracked with trembles and her nipples hardened into stones, Mary Eunice realized her acute hunger. She hadn't eaten all day. As though reading her mind, Lana called, "Sister? I'm ordering a pizza. Is cheese okay with you?"

"Yes, that's fine." The cold water did not soothe the weeping, red skin, but the rest of her ached from the chill; her teeth chattered. Still, she sat in the bath as long as she could tolerate it, and when she freed herself from the icy talons, her legs quaked so she wavered. She wrapped herself in a towel. "Where are the bandages?"

The towel served almost no purpose; her exposed body jerked to attention when Lana entered the room, and she gulped the dry lump in her throat. "Goodness, your lips are turning blue," Lana tutted. "Top drawer. Do you want help?"

"I—No, thank you." The back of Mary Eunice's neck warmed at the question in all of its innocence.

They shared pizza in the living room in front of a tiny black and white television where Walter Cronkite told them everything that was wrong with the world with his kind eyes. The evening had darkened with an upcoming storm. Lana drank a glass of wine while Mary Eunice had water, and they didn't speak much. "I'm sorry I burned the shit out of you."

In spite of the stinging flare over her skin, stifled under a wrap of white bandages, Mary Eunice smiled into the rim of her glass. "You warned me."

Lana snorted. "Yes, I did." She collected their plates and took them to the kitchen where the bitter
smell still caused her to come out coughing. "You were brilliant. I would've poured that water all over the fire."

"I worked in Briarcliff's kitchen for years. I learned some things." Mary Eunice stared at her lap. "From experience. One time I burned a whole oven full of bread. Sister Jude was furious. That was the only time she ever used her big cane."

"She caned you? The hell did you do to deserve that? Jesus Christ, what an ungodly bitch."

Heat rose to Mary Eunice's cheeks, and she fiddled with her fingers, uncertain how to respond; Sister Jude had explained to her how she deserved every caning she had received. "Spare the rod, spoil the child, is what Sister Jude says," she mumbled. Lana shot her a withering look, and she scrambled to defend herself, regretting her answer at all. "She only has one rule. I never got very good at following it."

"And what would that be?"

"Don't be a fool."

"The Lord looks after drunks and fools." Mary Eunice lifted her gaze, surprised at Lana's sudden hailing of faithful thought. Lana had a distant look about her, not making eye contact but staring out the window where the evening shadow stretched long. "My father always said that after he had one too many. He was both." She cleared her throat, shaking her head, as if to banish dark thoughts. "I'm going to take shower. Shout if you need something, alright?"

Mary Eunice nodded, and she headed for the bedroom alongside Lana. Lana left the bathroom door cracked open, light and steam streaming out of it, and the smell of her floral soap carried on the heavy, humid air. Mary Eunice knelt beside the bed and clasped her hands. Dear God. The prayer floated from her mind like strangled words from a tortured prisoner; she could not find the flow she had once used to communicate with the Father. The lack of love in her heart crippled her. I want to remember. Please, lift this cursed amnesia from me so that I may confess to all that I have done—to Your glory. I am a sinner. I have done so much wrong. Please, allow me to amend all of my wrongs, if it is written in Your will. Amen.

The end of the prayer made a thick, sour bile rise in her throat. She wanted to curl in the warm embrace of her faith and feel veiled in the security of belief once again. God had always granted her the fatherly love that she had never known from her own family. Now she could not sense Him any more. Cast out of heaven. The harsh thought sent her hands to her cheeks, smearing away the ugly tears that had begun to fall again.

Pull yourself together. You have the emotional spine of a mealworm. Lana is going to think you're out of your mind. Would she be wrong? Each self-deprecating thought caused her to cry a little harder, and she rose from her knees to sit on the bed as she plucked a tissue out of the box and dabbed the corners of her eyes and blew her nose. A coolness coiled around her like a serpent and cinched around her middle, tightening around her chest; goosebumps erupted over her leg, and the chafing of the rough bandages against her burned skin burst into an itching madness. Pulse pounding deep into her tongue, she lifted her head to the moving shadow upon the wall in the shape of a slim man.

Her fist bunched into the covers, and her other hand grappled into her pocket for her rosary. "Who are you?" The shadow shuddered and shuffled upon the paint "Go away! Leave me alone!" The breeze fluttered the curtains, and the grim shade rocked back to where it had begun. "You—You —" Her vision rolled into a blur through her terrified tears. The gray smear upon the wall pounced to the left, near to the bathroom, taunting her with the prospect of Lana's vulnerable body just through the open doorframe. "No! Don't—Don't touch her!" And it jerked back toward her again.
Mary Eunice folded her knees to her chest.

Though two-dimensional, she swore the gloomy figure turned to face her. Her body tightened, bracing for impact. The wind picked up, and the outline of the shadow trembled, prepared to lunge at her. A split of lightning dashed the room in white. Mary Eunice upstarted with a shriek; the lamplight died, and thunder quaked the house to its roots.

She groveled in the darkness and fell off the bed. The impact sent another scream from her lungs. Each brush of movement was the touch of the demon's frigid hands and vicious tongue against her flesh. A smothering weight landed across her face. She thrashed against it, first at the air, then striking something solid, hard, her hands cracking against it painfully.

A vice landed upon her shoulder, and she whirled around, hands flying up to defend her face from the inevitable assault. The grip on her shoulder lifted. "Sister!" Cold drops of water fell off of Lana's body upon Mary Eunice's face. She recoiled and struggled to pry herself away; she struck her head on the wooden nightstand behind her. "It's okay—It's okay. The power went out." Lana caught her hands by the wrists so she could no longer flail. "What happened?"

What happened? Her sob caught in her throat and choked her, breaths sucking and pushing against one another in twisted, hysterical pants of grief. "There—There was a—I saw—" The words broke from their intended sentences in a jumble. Lana placed an arm over her shoulders, and Mary Eunice curled into it, into the warm, wet curve of Lana's towel-clad body. "A thing—in the wall—" As lightning illuminated the room through the window once again, the shadow reappeared, and Mary Eunice cringed.

"That's a tree." Somehow, Lana managed to pinch all of the impatience out of her voice. "It's just a shadow. It's been there since I moved in. Used to scare the hell out of us." Mary Eunice closed her eyes and shook her head. Stupid, stupid, stupid—it was moving—it was coming after me—it was just a shadow.

Her own thoughts wouldn't collect themselves. She could not form a coherent response, but her body quivered, and her face balled up into a distressed wad. The sob emerged from her pinched lips; she stuffed her mouth into her hand to stifle it. "Here, get in bed. I'm going to find a flashlight.

Mary Eunice's hands yearned for Lana's touch, and when her companion left, the emptiness filled her again. With her face buried in a pillow, covers plucked up over her ears, her body wracked with inconsolable tears again. Stop it! Stop it! You're pathetic! You're disgusting! She flinched each time the thunder roared, the lightning flashed, until soft arms enveloped her once again. "I—I'm so—so sorry," she whimpered.

Lana pulled her near so that she could smell her skin, feel the wet streaks that her hair left behind. "You've done nothing to be sorry for. It's just a storm." Her hands smoothed over Mary Eunice's hair. With Lana's every breath, her head rose and fell upon her chest. I don't deserve this. Her voice dropped to a bare, croaking whisper. "I killed Clara."

The hands stilled. She's going to throw me out. I'm a murderer. I should go to prison. I should suffer. "It wasn't you." Mary Eunice's stomach twisted with such gravity that she swallowed to keep from vomiting. "Your hands are cleaner than most of those in that damned asylum." Another shaking, red-faced sniffle came forth. "Get some rest. The shadows won't move if you close your eyes."

Her eyelashes fluttered against Lana's shirt. "Thank you," she murmured. "For letting me stay here and… tolerating me."

Lana chuckled. "Misery loves company." She rested one arm across Mary Eunice's shoulders.
"Good night, Sister."

Closing her eyes prompted a slew of visions, and while Lana drifted to sleep without another word, Mary Eunice fought it; she tasted Clara's blood every time she allowed her mind to leave the room. Her shoulders tensed at the roar of thunder, growing more distant, and the shadow the lightning cast upon the wall. It looked less like a man now, more like a bent, sad tree. Relax. *You're safe here.*

Placing a hand upon Lana's belly, she allowed her eyes to flutter close again; this time, Clara did not appear, but rather, she saw the same memory of Lana that she had viewed hours earlier. Her hand prodded, intruded upon Lana's gaunt frame as the patient regarded her with glittering, hateful eyes. Beneath her fingertips, a second heartbeat purred, nearly double that of Lana's own pulse, which she could hear with no effort at all. In her other hand, she grasped the broken remains of a rusty wire hanger.

"Praise God." From the demon's mouth, the words were so irreverent, so misplaced. "Your attempt to murder this precious child was unsuccessful."

"You couldn't possibly know that."

The beast, a wolf in sheep's clothing, grinned, an evil thing, filled with vitriol. The expression held none of the genuine purity or joy that would have accompanied Mary Eunice in her life. "Oh, but I do. And I know something else." Leaning in, the taste of sweat and grime exhaled from Lana; unlike the rest of the patients, her spirit was unbroken, but she smelled of utter exhaustion. "It's a boy."

Mary Eunice sucked in a painful, loud breath, but Lana, fast asleep, didn't move. Her hand grazed the soft of Lana's stomach once again. *She's pregnant. That's why she was vomiting. That's why she ate half a dozen pickles.* The pressure of Lana's arm across her shoulders increased with the knowledge, and Mary Eunice clutched her a little tighter. *Bloody Face. He hurt her.*

She studied Lana's face, troubled even in rest. She reached for her rosary, but she could not take it without disturbing the bed, so she said her prayer without clinging to the cross like a life raft. *Lord, if I ask only one thing of You, let it not be a thing for me. I have wronged so many. Her lips trembled. Please keep Lana safe from harm, that any road You choose for her have brighter days than the paths that she has already wandered. Lord, please protect her.*

Chapter End Notes

I attempted to get the Spanish as close to what Clara and Mary Eunice actually said in the show as possible, but my listening comprehension is fairly weak. Translations are as follows:

*Padre nuestro...como en el cielo:* The Our Father prayer.
*Alejate, el Satanás:* Get away, Satan.
*Ponte de rodillas:* Get on your knees.
*El diablo, ahorrame:* The devil, save me.
*Sueltame, por favor:* Spare me, please.
*Repite. Padre en...en su servicio:* Repeat. Father in heaven, eternal source of all that is good, keep us faithful in your service.

Thank you for reading!
Chapter title: Psalm 30:5

Here is the third installment of To Light and Guard!

I apologize in advance for a huge anachronism in the text. When I was planning this piece, I decided I would use Simon and Garfunkel as a motif throughout it, as listening to their songs helped me get into the mindset of the century. (I was born in the late 90's; I'm not drawing off of any personal experience!)

So, in this chapter, Lana and Mary Eunice receive a Simon and Garfunkel record. In my own thoughtlessness, I described the whole album, not thinking that the record would logically have two songs, an A-side and B-side. I did not realize this mistake until late last night, when I was in the middle of writing a chapter much farther down the road. Because I have already used many references to lyrics from Simon and Garfunkel's first album to give symbols and make points, I've decided to leave it as is. Perhaps it's a little chronologically wonky, but I think the recurring motif adds enough value that it's worth the exchange.

Thanks for reading!

Over the following week, Lana learned one thing about Mary Eunice: the woman knew damn well how to keep a house. "You're not my maid, Sister," she had said more times than she cared to admit. Mary Eunice found everything dirty in the house and cleaned it. She vacuumed every other day. She scrubbed out the tub and the toilet and the sink. She swept and mopped every tile surface. She did the laundry—both the clothes that they had dirtied and the ones that had gained a musty smell from hanging in the closet while Lana was incarcerated. She made up the bed every morning. Lana couldn't keep track of everything that she had done to improve the appearance of her house, but Mary Eunice had appointed herself the housekeeper, and no matter how Lana dissuaded her, she continued her craze of tidying up.

She's bored, Lana knew, and she's keeping herself busy. With the comfort of another presence so nearby, the reprieve she found in a warm body sharing a bed with her every night, she had begun to write her book. Mary Eunice didn't disturb her except to feed her, which seemed to happen almost every two hours like clockwork. With each meal brought to her, Lana found herself crippled by guilt, frustrated that she allowed Mary Eunice to wait on her hand and foot—frustrated that Mary Eunice wouldn't stop.

It didn't help that Mary Eunice had a knack for choosing Wendy's clothes. Several times, Lana had bitten her tongue, halfway through calling out the wrong name. Tears sprang to her eyes at the thought, and Lana set her jaw, staring hard at the blank piece of paper before her while she waited for them to disappear. She had typed, "Chapter Two," and nothing beneath it; her eyes wandered from the keyboard to the telephone and back again. She said she would return my call by noon. Nerves quelled in Lana's stomach, and she pushed back from the table. A watched phone never rings.

"Sister?" An earthy smell boiled from the kitchen, and Lana took her empty glass and headed into
the room where Mary Eunice stirred a pot of peeled potatoes, having begun to cut them into uneven chunks with a fork. "Oh, that smells delicious."

"Thank you." Mary Eunice pushed her long sleeves up to her elbows. She had tied her hair back in a loose ponytail. "How's the book coming?" She spooned out a fair portion of butter, and after she stared at it, she scooped out a little more.

Lana grinned watching Mary Eunice's generous serving of butter. As it melted, she dumped in flour as well, whipping it into a paste. "It's… difficult." The admission caused her to nibble on her bottom lip. "Maybe it's too soon. I could always go back to normal stories. Newspaper articles. Tell people what they want to hear."

"Do you want to do that?" The innocent, probing tone to Mary Eunice's voice caught Lana off guard. A candid discussion of her career felt misplaced; she had always made a point to leave her work in the office, to allow Wendy their evenings to share the stories that had happened during the school day. Lana would confess that Wendy easily had the more interesting job. She loved hearing Wendy's stories about the funny things the kids had said, loved supporting the school teacher through difficult parents and coworkers, loved helping her grade tests when she procrastinated too long on them.

Forcing herself to gaze into the pot of half-done soup, Lana swallowed the budding lump in her throat. Stop. Stop thinking of her. "I don't know." A quiet confession breathed from her lips. Blue eyes landed on the side of her face. "I have to do something. I can't sit here and waste away. And the money won't go far. Shelling out a hundred dollars on an abortion isn't exactly helping matters. She squashed the bitter thought.

Mary Eunice poured some milk into the soup and increased the heat on the burner. "I think you should do what makes you feel happy and safe." With an absent look upon her face, she continued to stir the pot. "Not that you asked for my opinion." Smiling, she looked back to Lana, quizzical, awaiting a response, but her eyes still held that nervous glimmer, the fear that Lana had used on her first trip to Briarcliff to gain herself admittance to the asylum.

"I value your thoughts." Lana leaned against the counter with a wry grin, arms crossed. "Compared to me, you're practically blonde Jesus."

A blush rose to Mary Eunice's cheeks. "You're very kind, Lana. But we all have our sins." She plucked at the frayed hem of her sweater, Wendy's sweater. It hugged her frame, and Lana's eyes wandered across the modest fabric. "I more than others."

"You're difficult on yourself, Sister." Mary Eunice ducked her head, not responding. Lana arched an eyebrow. They had had more versions of this conversation than she cared to admit. "I was taught that God's love is unconditional. That He forgives all sins. It applies to you, too, don't you think?"

"God has forgiven me." She tucked a single lock of hair behind her ear. "I am more concerned with whether I can learn to forgive myself."

Oh, for fuck's sake. Lana resisted the urge to roll her eyes and curse aloud, to grab Mary Eunice by the shoulders and shake her hard and scream, You are better than this! right in her face until she believed it. "Is that why you've personally enslaved yourself to me? Is this all some self-imposed punishment for you, to redeem yourself?"

Mary Eunice straightened, shocked at the proposal. "N-No!" She settled the spoon in the pot, hugging herself around the middle. "I—I—" Lana's sharp gaze didn't relent, and Mary Eunice stammered through her thoughts. You're putting her on the spot, Lana warned herself. Don't push
"I want to be your friend, and—and I like taking care of things, I've told you that. It gives me something to do."

Scrutinizing her pink face, Lana searched for any sign of deceit. "I hope you know that you don't have to earn my friendship. I wouldn't have allowed the Monsignor to bring you here if I planned on treating you like a stranger."

"Why did you?" The abrupt question caused Lana to narrow her eyes. "Why did you want me to come here?" Mary Eunice's pleading look, pursed lips and slack jaw, pierced Lana's soul with a question for which she had no answer. The silence stretched for an earnest moment before, expression darkening, she amended, "I—I'm sorry, I have no right to demand that of you."

Lana's eyes widened, and she rushed to excuse herself. "No, no, it's fine." She licked her lips. "I think that—" The bright ringing of the telephone split her sentence, and with a mutter of, "Shit," Lana raced out of the kitchen back into the office. "Eastside 7-7387."

"Is this the residence of Jane Summers?"

A heavy sigh fluttered from Lana's lungs, but her heart leapt into her throat and flopped about like a fish with no water. "This is she." Sweat erupted under her arms and at her palms, though this was unlike the other hot flashes that she experienced at random; this accompanied the clean, friendly voice on the other end of the line. "I—I would like to make an appointment."

"I apologize for making you wait earlier. My husband is not incredibly supportive of my business. I couldn't speak to you in his presence." The doctor cleared her throat, and Lana could hear the sound of a pen scratching on paper. "My next opening is Friday morning. The cost is one hundred dollars."

"I have it," Lana assured. Tears budded in the corner of her eyes; she dabbed them away with her fingertips, cursing herself. This is what you want. The phone call felt unclean, like every word poisoned her blood. "I have a few questions about the procedure, Dr. Sullivan."

"Oh, honey, I'm sure you do." The doctor laughed, a musical and carefree sound that caused Lana's blood to boil in her veins. She pressed her tongue hard against the roof of her mouth. "Everyone wants to know how much it hurts. Let me tell you, it's not incredibly pleasant, but I'd still take it over childbirth any day of the week. The risk is very low, all of my tools are sanitized. You'll bleed for a day or two, and then you'll be back to normal. I've never had an accident here, in seven years of practice. You'd be surprised how many women end up in situations like you, Miss Summers."

Pinching the bridge of her nose, she replied, "What time Friday?"

"Nine AM. It shouldn't take more than an hour. Just a brief exam and then the abortion. See you then, Miss Summers?"

"Friday, nine AM."

"Have a good—" Lana hung up the phone, mouth a bitter, sharp line. Her stomach had hardened into stone, and she held her chin in her hand, measuring her pulse and waiting for it to slow. What a heartless bitch. The cheery doctor apparently had no sense of discretion, no sympathy for the women who came into her care.

Mary Eunice's soft footsteps and the nutty scent of cooked soup interrupted her thoughts. She placed the bowl on the desk in front of her. "Lana? Are you alright?" She laid a delicate hand upon Lana's shoulder. "What's the matter?"
The touch splintered Lana's resolve a little more as she found her spine leaning in, caving toward
the hand. In her mind, she saw it—herself curling into Mary Eunice's arms and requesting a few
minutes' reprieve through well-earned tears. Mary Eunice would ask no questions. *He doesn't
deserve any more tears.* This thought caused her to straighten, her hands balling into fists. *He
doesn't deserve any more control over my life.* "I'm fine." She shook off the hand before she could
succumb to it. She would not weep for him.

"Okay." Mary Eunice's skeptical tone caused Lana's teeth to grind. "Here's the soup. I left the pot
on the stove, in case you want more." Why is she always so damn nice? "I—I think I'm going to
trim the hedges, if you don't mind. I could use the fresh air." Would it kill her to be a little bitchy
every once in awhile? Lana pinched herself in the thigh to stifle the negative thoughts pouring
against Mary Eunice, the only available punching bag in the vicinity.

You're angry and you're frustrated and it's not her fault, she reminded herself. With a nod, she
said, "The trimmers are in the shed outside. You'll find gloves out there, too." Lana sucked in a
deep breath. "Thank you, Sister." She lifted her head to face Mary Eunice and forced a smile upon
her face, a desperate, watery grimace with trembling edges.

Mary Eunice nodded, hand grazing Lana's shoulder smoothly. She hadn't chased the concern from
her face. "Shout if you need something," she said after a long pause.

After she left, Lana crumpled at the desk, shoulders sinking, burying her face in her hands, and
fought the tears in silent solitude—the way that she preferred it. All of Mary Eunice's sympathy
crippled her; her understanding made Lana weak at the knees when she wanted to stand straighter
and forget everything that had happened and act like a normal person again. Mary Eunice's
worried looks and welcoming arms validated feelings that Lana preferred stuffed into the dark
crevices of her mind, better left unvisited.

Yet, as she raised her eyes to the typewriter before her, her vision hazed with unshed tears; she
couldn't make out the fine print letters on each key. Fury burbled in her chest. "I am not weak."
She placed her hands on the keyboard and repeated the sentence, a mantra in her mind. "I am not
weak." Her fingers clicked over the keys, each letter earning its own place like Lana had earned
her freedom from Bloody Face, from Briarcliff.

The words poured upon the page, and they created such a current that Lana no longer minded the
tears that flowed from her eyes in an equally free fashion. "I first met Bloody Face soon after I
was wrongfully incarcerated at Briarcliff during my attempt to reach out to Kit Walker. His name
was Oliver Thredson; he was the court-appointed psychiatrist to treat Kit Walker. I would later
learn that he had volunteered for the position specifically so that he could manipulate Kit into
confessing to his crimes, so he could continue to murder without hindrance.

"I have always considered myself a good judge of character, and Dr. Thredson struck me as a
gentle, benign man who cared genuinely for the patients under his care. He frequently confronted
the manager of Briarcliff, Sister Jude, over the barbaric treatments she used against many of her
patients, including outdated electroshock therapy. Though he was at Briarcliff for Kit Walker, he
offered to help other patients work through their difficulties under the table. This was how I got to
know him better. He reached out to me and told me plainly that he could attempt to help me with
my affliction."

The lie burned. She had already lied about Wendy. The words stung fiercely, every web she spun
an outrage against her lover who had left her everything in her will. *Is this the best that I can give
her?* Lana reached for chapter one, flipped through it, touched the name each time it occurred.
Could she revise? Yes. Did she want to? Did she want to expose herself to the world? *It will take
eyes away from the story that needs to be told.* With a coarse jerk of her hand, she smeared the hot
tears from her cheeks. Already, they had fallen onto the paper and caused the ink to blur. *What*
about Wendy's story?

Wendy was a pawn in a morbid game of chess. First played by the government and the school system, so deep in the closet that she would not share a kiss with the blinds open, so frightened by discovery that they made love in the dark, often fully clad. She had never shaken the shame that her parents had implanted in her; every time she touched Lana's body, she heard their jabbed words like daggers. Then Sister Jude had come and moved the pawn to the exact place she was needed— signing the paperwork that bound Lana to Briarcliff as mentally ill, frightened at the thought of discovery, at the prospect of losing everything that she had worked for. Then, before the pawn had the strength to become a more instrumental piece in the game, Bloody Face came and snuffed her out, removed her from the board.

In this story, Lana was the white queen. She could not afford to spend it discussing an expendable pawn. But god, I miss her. The nighttimes poured loneliness into her, even with another warm body in the bed beside her, even when Mary Eunice curled so near that they could taste one another's breath and feel the brushes of eyelashes on skin. When she closed her eyes in the middle of the night, she could convince herself that Wendy's arms wrapped around her, and when she saw Mary Eunice from behind, the figures looked so close that she had to keep herself from running her fingers through the golden hair. But Mary Eunice would always be a pale imitation for a single reason: Mary Eunice was untouchable.

The phone rang again and snatched Lana from her reverie. "Shit!" Several of her papers scattered when she startled upward to answer. I can't catch a break. "Eastside 7-7387." She swallowed the dry lump in her throat and pulled the steaming bowl of soup close before it cooled. She stirred it as the other end of the line crackled to her.

"Miss Winters? This is Monsignor Timothy Howard from Briarcliff. I've called to discuss Sister Mary Eunice." Oh, I'm sure you have, Lana bit back. You haven't called for her in over a week. She's certainly a top priority. "Is she well?"

"Yes, she's fine." No thanks to you. "She's recovering. Very busy praying, and, er, things. I took her to mass last Sunday at the local parish. I think she enjoyed it."

"That's— That's excellent." The Monsignor's voice cracked suspiciously, and Lana's eyes narrowed. She wished that she could see his face, that he had the courage to have this conversation face-to-face with her. "I haven't yet had time to discuss her reassignment with the Mother Superior. I assume that she has no wish to return to Briarcliff?"

"She and I haven't discussed it."

His nervous wheeze answered. "I— I suppose it is a bit of an elephant in the room for the both of you, yes?" Clearing his throat, he continued, "Has Sister Mary Eunice divulged anything to you— anything that happened while she was under the influence?"

Lana set her jaw and pinched her eyes closed, shoving all thoughts of the Mexican to the side. Mary Eunice had trusted her with her few memories, with her vulnerabilities, and Lana had no intention of violating Mary Eunice's trust. "No," she lied, straightforward in her address. "She has amnesia. She hardly remembers anything. I've offered her what I know, but it's like putting together a puzzle with only half of the pieces."

A hesitant pause crackled over the line; Lana counted his breaths. "She doesn't remember anything?"

"Very little."
"Perhaps that's for the best." His fingers rapped on something solid, an upbeat rhythm as he sifted through his thoughts like flour. "Yes, I think that that's good. She would be inconsolable if she knew some portions of the truth, I think. It's better that we allow her to return to her natural state—as it was before she was possessed."

*You want to lie to her.* Lana sucked her teeth, reluctant to accuse him, but she detected a slimy note to his voice, something that didn't fit with the rest of the narrative. "Sister Mary Eunice would like to have a better picture of what happened at Briarcliff," she said, inclining one eyebrow. "She feels that it is important for her to confess and amend for all of her sins. You of all people should understand how much she values her faith."

His words slowed, released from his lips with the utmost care. "Sister Mary Eunice is lucky to have gained such a fierce friend in you, Miss Winters." She set her jaw; she would not allow his flattery to shake her from her stance. "The Lord will not hold sins against her that she did not knowingly commit. Confession is not necessary."

"Are you speaking for God now, Monsignor?" Lana resented the protective emotion which dripped into her voice like a leaky faucet. She fought to rein in her tongue.

"I speak for Sister Mary Eunice's best interests. Another might have had her stripped of her title and expelled from the order."

Lana's had balled up into fists; she clutched the phone so tightly that her skin of her knuckles whitened. The taste of her own anger, bitter and spicy, lingered in the back of her throat. "Is that a threat?" She counted the seconds as they ticked by while he considered his answer. "Do not try to lie to me, Monsignor. I have a degree in journalism. Manipulating language is my job."

"No, Miss Winters, I do not intend to threaten Sister Mary Eunice's position in the order. But I do believe it is in her best interest to be reassigned by the Mother Superior to a different facility, and I also believe that she will be much happier if she remains as she is—ignorant of the things she did while possessed. Do you agree?"

"Yes." *I also think you're full of shit and trying to cover your own ass.*

"It is not your duty to involve yourself in our inner-church matters. I'm sure that Sister Mary Eunice would agree with me," Lana forced her fingers to unclench and rolled them out across her thigh. The Monsignor had a voice like poisoned honey, and while she recognized her own distrustful tendencies, his particular brand of charm made her burn inside. "I have had one of the other sisters go through Sister Mary Eunice's chamber and collect her things. Would it trouble you if I bring them by tomorrow?"

"Not at all." Lana did not regret her clipped tone of voice in the slightest. "Good day, Monsignor." He hung up the phone without reply so that the line died, and she dropped the phone back on the receiver. *That man is a snake in the grass if I have ever known one.* He was hiding something; she could taste the secrets upon his every word, cloaked in false benevolence.

Lana reached into the drawer of her desk and pulled out a notepad. Perhaps this conversation had nothing to do with her book, but she wanted note of it anyway. She titled the page, "What could the Monsignor want?"

Then, absent, she nibbled on the end of her pen. What did typical men want? **Sex.** It went on the top of the list. But with whom? And why did he stay within his profession? "Possible," she remarked aloud, "but unlikely." Likewise, she crossed off **Money,** as the Monsignor had chosen a job of little wealth. Last, she added **Power.** She found that option the most possible. "Power over what?" she mused. "Over whom?"
She gazed at the list, belly unsettled at the unanswered questions and her own speculation. "This doesn't make any sense." The sounds of chopping limbs from outside drew her attention, and Lana stood from the desk to look out the window where Mary Eunice had trimmed the front hedges from overgrown branches to round, plump heads. Mary Eunice pulled her hair back out of her face into a loose ponytail, and the wind tousled it into a series of tangles. She gathered the cluster of branches that she had cut and headed for the trash bin she had set up in the front yard.

It didn't make any sense. But as long as Mary Eunice was involved, however unknowingly, Lana intended to get to the bottom of it.

... 

**Friday morning.** The date burned in Mary Eunice's mind. Imminent, just two days away, when Lana would go and have her womb scraped clean by some person, maybe a doctor, maybe not. Oh, she had heard Lana's cryptic end of the conversation; she didn't need much else to clue her in. She was naive, but she was not stupid. Lana had no desire to harbor Thredson's abominable offspring inside her body for months, to raise him as her own or to give him away; anything that came from Thredson surely had a level of *psycho* that neither Lana nor Mary Eunice wished to cross again in their lifetimes.

*But he's Lana's, too.* And, as much as Mary Eunice believed that Bloody Face's child would follow in his footsteps, would possess his same intellectual form of insanity, she held that anything coming from Lana would certainly have her kindness, her courage, her gentle brand of strength. *She would make a great mother.*

She snipped more furiously at the branches to clear her mind. The ones in the front of the house had overgrown with thorns; they smelled of old roses, but the bush had died and needed uprooted before the spring. The thorns pricked into her upper arms when she gathered the branches up and doubled back to the trash can that she had set up. *It isn't for me to decide.* As much as the thought burned within her, stung like Sister Jude had laid the cane across her rear end, she knew that she could not influence Lana. It wasn't her place. Lana had offered her nothing but kindness and sympathy when she did not deserve it, and she could not bring herself to bite Lana's hand in turn. If their positions were reversed, if Mary Eunice had to make a decision and Lana was with her, Lana would support her.

Her stomach squirmed at the prospect. In her mind's eye, a harrowing male figure, tall and thin and somewhat greasy, like Dr. Arden, strapped her to a flat, metal table and slid his hands between her thighs, tools rusted and unclean. "Try not to scream, dear."

Not for the first time in her life, Mary Eunice thanked God for her vows of chastity. Childbearing was all varieties of unpleasantness to which she would never become subject. *Lana probably thought the same.* The branches tumbled into the trash bin with a rumble against the plastic. A cool shiver trailed down her spine, and she shuddered.

The late September breeze caused her to pluck down the sleeves of her sweater as she returned to the side of the house and trimmed at the next hedge, this one bearing more benign leaves, no thorns. Each movement sent a twinge through her abdomen, one top of her healing burn, which she had unbandaged as it improved. *Lord, please guide me so that I can help Lana. Let me be a better friend to her. Give me a kind spirit and pure thoughts to aid her.*

Then, as she snipped the branches and the leaves and the cool wind stealing the brown and orange autumn bits, she prayed the rosary, mumbling the words at her own tempo. Once she had shaped the bushes on the side of the house, she eyed the dead tree outside the bedroom which cast the ghoulish shadow at night, the one that she hated with a passion. "An angel calms their fears," she
prayed, seizing up the tree. "He is not here. He has risen as he said."

She found a ladder stuffed in the back corner of the shed along with a long, somewhat dull saw. "Jesus appears to—Ow!" The ladder slipped out of her hand and smashed on top of her foot, and she staggered into a quick, pain-induced dance. "Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and Peter and two disciples on the way to Emmaus." Righting the ladder against the trunk of the tree, she thumped it a couple times. It rocked, but she trusted it long enough to cut down those bothersome branches.

The whole tree creaked, and as she scaled the ladder, the wind gusted against her with greater force. In one white-knuckled hand, she clutched the saw, and she crafted a lopsided gait to climb higher, heart pounding into her throat. "That evening, He appears to the apostles behind locked doors. 'Peace be unto you…'" Another gust blasted her hair back out of her face and stung her eyes. "Do not be afraid."

Already, the venture had entailed more risk that Mary Eunice would have liked, but as she neared the top of the ladder, she could reach one of the old branches. "Jesus breathes on them and gives them the power to forgive sin."

She reached for the lower branch first and ground the saw right where it met the trunk in jagged jerks. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name…" As she spoke the sacred words, images of Clara flashed to the front of her mind, the rhythm of the prayer reviving the visions that she had managed to stifle—things she had reviewed with Lana and hoped not to discuss again. Lana had a way of helping her feel cleaner, even when she found herself horrified at her own filth. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Her eyes misted over. Deliver us from evil. She snatched more fervently against the bark; the sound of the splintering pleased her. "Amen."

Swallowing hard, she wiped the cold sweat from her brow with the torn sleeve of her shirt and began the next prayer. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." The branch broke off, and she tossed it to the ground. "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus." She lifted one foot up to the next rung and reached for the next highest branch.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen." She paused, allowing herself to collect her thoughts. And what sinners we are. Another strong wind caught her around the middle like a cruel jab. Overhead, another branch splintered off of the dead tree and clattered down upon her. It smashed against the other branches, shaking leaves in her face, and tangled in her feet.

The emptiness swallowed her from below. She relinquished the saw in favor of grappling for a hold on the tree branch, and it clanged against the ladder. She dangled from the branch like a monkey. "Oh, no." She swung herself, struggled to pull herself up onto the branch, but she didn't have the strength. "Lana! Lana! I'm going to fall. What would Lana do? Catch her? "Lana!" She gazed down at the ground, some fifteen feet below.

"Hey, Lois, look over there! There's a lady stuck in Lana's tree!" Mary Eunice couldn't turn her head to see who had identified her, but the woman's voice didn't remind her of anyone in particular. She scrambled with her shoes against the trunk of the tree, hoping to gain some leverage. "C'mon, help me! We gotta catch her!"

"Catch her?" echoed another woman. "Barb!"

"I did cheerleading in college, I just need your help. Get underneath her." A kind face appeared below, stepping over the mess of the ladder and branches that Mary Eunice had dropped at the base of the tree. "Hey there, honey. We'll catch you, alright? Oh, Lois, stop piddling. Now, let go,
and we got your back."

Who are you? Given more upper arm strength, Mary Eunice would have asked the question, but as her shoulders rolled in pain and her palms sweatied against the bark, she could not think of a single objection to their proposition. Her grip relinquished.

A short scream followed with the bouncing impact of two pairs of arms treating her as a sand bag. She rocked to her feet and then landed on her back side with a loud, "Oof!" whistling all the air out of her lungs. She rubbed her eyes and looked up at her two rescuers. Both women, one short and pudgy, the other taller and leaner. "Thank you."

The shorter one offered a hand, which Mary Eunice took, and pulled her to her feet. "Well, you're just a pretty little dyke, aren't you?" Mary Eunice blinked, taken aback by the blunt statement. "Are you alright?"

Lana raced around the front of the house. "I heard a scream! What's the…" Her thought ended where it had begun as she drank in the view of the two new women. "Barb, Lois," she greeted, licking her lips. "What are you doing here?"

The shorter woman—Barb, Mary Eunice assumed—straightened and grinned. "Oh, we were just saving your new pet from falling to her death out of your old tree." The expression ebbed a little. "Really, Lana? Already? Isn't this just a little tasteless? She's wearing Wendy's sweater, for god's sake. A good fuck isn't worth it."

They both fixed challenging gazes upon Lana. Lana, though, pushed her shoulders back at their confrontation where Mary Eunice had begun to cave and blush under their scrutiny. "Are you alright?" she asked, and Mary Eunice bobbed her head, averting her eyes. Lana narrowed her eyes and glanced back to Barb. "This is Barb and Lois. They're both college friends of mine. And they're not always as unfriendly and tactless as they seem right now."

"I'm tactless?"

Lana raised an eyebrow at Barb. "This is Sister Mary Eunice from Briarcliff. She's staying with me until the church has her reassigned to a better position." Barb's face promptly colored a bright shade of pink.

Lois smirked, chest shaking with laughter. "That was perfect, Barb. Honestly—you've done a lot of stupid things, but that one—wow. You called a nun—"

"Shut up, Lois—"

"—a dyke—"

"Really?"

"—to her face!"

Barb set her jaw and narrowed her eyes. "How was I supposed to know? She's not wearing a habit! Besides, she's not offended—are you offended?" Mary Eunice shook her head. "See, she's not offended. If it bothered her, she obviously wouldn't be staying with Lana."

"Yes, it's hilarious," Lana deadpanned. She rested a hand on Mary Eunice's elbow, an apology written on her face, and Mary Eunice ducked into a reassuring smile. She had twigs tangled in her hair and thorns stuck in the torn sweater. "Now that you've both finished assaulting my roommate, what do you want?"
"Oh, c'mon, Lana, *assailing* is a bit of a harsh word. We *did* keep her from breaking her neck in your tree," Lois soothed, smoothing her hair with one hand. "We came for your birthday. Barb baked a cake." She gestured to the cake pan and paper bag that they had dropped in the yard; the lid had popped off of the pan, and the icing had smeared. "It got a little bumped up, but it ought to taste the same."

The irritation upon Lana's face waned slightly. "My birthday isn't for two more weeks."

"Well, we know that." Barb raised an eyebrow. "I'm going home to see my family, and Lois's daddy is taking her up fishing in Maine. But if you'd rather us take the cake with us, then, by all means….

Lana held up a hand, and Lois chuckled, nudging Barb in the ribs with her elbow. "You had me at cake." Mary Eunice plucked some of the twigs and thorns from her body. "Come inside. It's getting cold."

Barb followed with a knowing mumble back to Lois. "I told you she still couldn't cook for shit." The home exhaled the earthy scent of potato soup, and she hesitated. "Maybe I spoke too soon."

A wry laugh left Lana's mouth. "Sister Mary Eunice cooked potato soup for lunch. I was banished from the kitchen after I nearly burned the house down trying to fry chicken."

"What have we told you? You never cover a pan with oil! Never!" Barb rolled her eyes. "I know Lois can't cook, but at least she isn't dangerous. It just tastes like soggy bread—honey, that's a compliment." Barb winked at her to soothe Lois's urge to defend herself.

"Would you like a bowl of soup?" Mary Eunice offered, feeling more and more out of place as the three women settled in the living room.

Barb hooted her approval and bounced up to her feet. "Thought you'd never ask! Two spoons, Lois?"

"Barb, we *just* had lunch."

"Then I'll eat it myself."

"Fine, fine, two spoons." Mary Eunice hovered awkwardly until Lana grabbed her arm and pulled her down onto the couch. She landed with a squeak of surprise. Lana plucked anxiously at her hair to relieve the protruding twigs. Lois stooped over and began to empty the brown paper bag. "Happy birthday." She took out two tall bottles of wine and a wrapped record.

Lana brightened. "Oh, great! Wine! Who told you I needed more of this?" She popped the top off of one bottle and inhaled the sweet scent.

"We're emptying our cabinets from housewarming three years ago. We never drink in home. Barb likes to go bust her wallet at Pat Joe's."

"It's only because you can't dance, sweetie." Barb reentered the room with a tall bowl of soup. "This is magnificent, by the way, Sister. Here, Lois, try it." Mary Eunice shrugged in thanks.

"I can't dance, I can't cook. What can I do?"

"You're a fabulous carpet-muncher." They both laughed so hard that they spilled the soup on themselves; Lana's face darkened into a deep red hue. Mary Eunice frowned in confusion and looked to Lana for elaboration, but Lana avoided her gaze. "Speaking of—Lana, did you hear about Sally and Samantha?"
"Hold up—if we're going to gossip, we're going to drink some wine. I'm going to get some glasses." Once everyone had a glass of wine, Lana nodded to Barb. "Okay, go."

Mary Eunice stared into her glass. "Okay—so, Sally and Samantha, from college? They decided they wanted to have a baby. Sally has been screwing Sam's brother for months. Y'know, since he's a queen. Man, their parents got unlucky. Anyway, it's become a whole thing. He's living with his boyfriend and they're all moved in with them. Freaky, right?"

"You're right, that sounds awful." Lois distributed the cake slices among them, and again, Mary Eunice found herself abstaining while everyone else dug in.

"Personally," Lois cut in, "if you want a baby, that's your business, not mine. But the whole uncle-daddy business would make me so uncomfortable. And living together? When Sally and Devin have already been dicking around for months? There's something there that ain't kosher, I'm just saying. If Barb screwed around with my brother, that would be a deal breaker, baby or no baby."

"Don't tease, honey, you hate children."

"That's beside the point."

Lana snorted and shook her head, but she didn't make eye contact with them, lost in her own thoughts, and Mary Eunice watched her face. When Lois and Barb entertained themselves with the cake, sharing wine glasses and forks, she touched Lana's knee. "Are you okay?" She mouthed the words. Lana promptly jerked her head in protest.

"So, Sister." Mary Eunice stiffened under Barb's attention. "What's it like being a nun? Does the church send you places to do service projects? Do you spend your days reading to boys and girls and spreading the good news?" She leaned in, intently interested, and Mary Eunice's belly quivered under her bright eyes. "Did they teach you to make good soup in nun school?"

"Don't be silly, Barb, there's no such thing as nun school."

"Maybe there is, Lois. Are you a nun? No, you are not. Besides, I didn't ask you."

Her cheeks tinted pink as she replied, "I—I was trained in nursing. I've been stationed at Briarcliff since I took my vows." She shifted in discomfort. The way Barb stared at her, so prying, so critical, made her feel like she had climbed the diving board again, like everyone viewed her body bare and laughed at her folly. Barb was undressing her with her gaze. The prospect made Mary Eunice want to vomit. She closed her eyes and pretended she was talking to Lana instead. "I worked in the bakery primarily, but I also lived on the grounds and did evening patrols to make sure that everyone was safe in their cells."

"Lived there?" Lois echoed. She had much kinder eyes, a gentler look than Barb. "That sounds frightening. Aren't there, like, big-time criminals in there? That Santa Claus killer? How were you safe?"

"Briarcliff has very committed guards and security staff, and everyone on staff is trained to handle an emergency. I also prayed a rosary every night before bed just to make sure."

Lois chuckled and sipped her wine. "If some psycho kills me before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take," she teased. "The cake's not poisoned," she enticed as a second thought. "You can eat it. If we wanted to kill Lana, we'd do it with our hands."

Mary Eunice glanced down at the bowl in her lap. "I'm not allowed. Sister Jude says that sweets
lead to sin, and drunkenness impairs faithful judgment." She swallowed the dry spot in her throat that had swollen since they had all sat in the living room.

Barb's hungry eyes glowed. "Sister Jude?" The morbid interest in her tone caused dread to pool in the pit of Mary Eunice's stomach. "That's, like, the really awful head honcho nun that you talked about, right, Lana?" Lana nodded quickly and took a few hearty gulps of wine before pouring her glass full again. "Right—you need a lot in your system to talk about somebody like that." Barb grinned wickedly. "What's she like? I mean, to someone who's part of the in crowd. Obviously Lana thinks that she's a hard-ass."

"Sister Jude believes mental illness is the expression of sin in real life. She believes that we must purge ourselves of folly and indulgence to become closer to God."

Tilting her head back, Lois gulped down the rest of her glass. "Christ, she sounds like a bitch. Barb, would you not look so interested? You're drooling. Just shut up and eat your cake, drink your wine."

Barb paid Lois no heed, batting her off as she took another sip from her wine glass. "So how does she go about purging? I mean, assigning rosaries or something?" The genuine interest on her face had a predatory shadow. "Or something a bit more sinister?" Barb purred the last word, distinct and alto.

Mary Eunice proceeded with caution. "Sister Jude has the authority to punish the patients and the sisters under her authority," she hedged, "as she sees fit, under the eye of Mother Superior. But she has rarely given a punishment where it wasn't merited." Lana coughed into her fist, and Mary Eunice knew that she was stifling an eye roll. "Most misbehaviors earn a caning. It takes a much more serious offense to merit a stricter punishment—electroshock therapy or scalding bath."

Barb hummed at the mention of a caning. "Were you ever caned, Mary?" She flinched inwardly at the sound of her first name rolling off of Barb's lips. Sweat caked her armpits in a drizzle and slid between her thighs. She pinched her legs closer together. "If you don't mind me calling you that."

"I was caned when Sister Jude found it appropriate."

"You don't seem the type to misbehave. What did you do? Stumble across your Latin?"

"Barb, leave her alone. You're making her uncomfortable," Lois dissuaded. Then, to Mary Eunice, she said, "Barb has a thing for a woman in uniform. She wants to hear all about some ugly old biddy with nothing better to do smacking your ass cherry red for laughs."

"Damn right, I do." Barb winked, not for the first time since she had entered the home. "Won't you look at that, now she's really blushing. And I was embarrassing her." She nudged Lois in the ribs with her elbow, neither of them looking at Lana, whose gaze smoldered murderously. As Mary Eunice shrank back into her seat and hugged herself, hoping to dissuade Barb's wandering eyes, Lana placed a hand upon her knee. Barb continued in a hoot, "Maybe I should become a nun. Sister Jude could take me over her knee any day!"

Lana muttered, "Gross," as Lois pointed out, "The point of being a nun is that you're married to God. I don't think God would want you to have a side bitch. I'm sure that they'd welcome you as a committed patient, though." She sniffed and took a long sip from her wine glass. "And if you keep hitting on Sister Mary Eunice, I'll be glad to sign for you."

"Bullshit, Lois!" Barb's playful face narrowed into a mean scowl at her girlfriend. "Lana, ignore her, she's being a bitch." All the eyes softened from their meaningless banter as Lois realized what she had said and blanched. "I'm sorry." Barb's words dropped their predatory tone, the glimmer
leaving her eyes. It made her face warmer and rounder. "She was scared, Lana. I know you probably don't give a damn about that, but that nasty woman came in here and bullied her and threatened her. She thought she didn't have a choice, and she knew that she had made a mistake as soon as she did it. We talked to her. She was coming back for you, to hell with the consequences."

Without the flirtatious curve to her lips, Barb had an earnest glow; Mary Eunice understood, watching her lean forward and meet Lana's eyes in a genuine way, how they had become friends. "I know." Lana's whisper had a bitter taste; Mary Eunice wanted to hug her, but she didn't dare reach out in front of Barb and Lois. "I don't blame her. I'm not angry." She crossed one arm over her chest, retreating from Mary Eunice's touch. "I hope she isn't angry with me."

"Oh, Lana." Lois's eyes glistened. "You know she wouldn't be. She loved you more than anything in the world." She smiled, a woeful thing. 'Do you remember, in college, when that one creepy stoner girl learned the song 'Some Enchanted Evening' and played it for you on her guitar?"

"Her name was Billie," Barb provided. "I should know. I did her after you turned her down. And the lack of teeth was quite the hindrance when it came to things between the sheets, if you wanted to know."

Lana rolled her eyes. "I didn't."

Lois cleared her throat. "As I was saying. It pissed Wendy off so much, some other girl getting a shred of your attention, that she went and bought herself a guitar, remember? Splurged all of her savings on it so that she could write you a song all her own. Then she performed it in front of all of us. We had it stuck in our heads for months." She grinned and took another slice of cake. They had already emptied the first bottle of wine, each of them eyeing the second before Lana took the liberty of opening it. "I bet we could still sing the words."

"If you're singing—" Barb cut off mid-sentence to belch. She continued, "If you're singing, I ain't stickin' around to listen. I used to stand next to you in church. Caterwauling, really." She thrust the wrapped record at Lana. "Since we're drinking the rest of your birthday, we can let Paul and Arty do the singing. Put us on a little vinyl, honey."

Lana ripped into the packaging with delicate fingers. "Simon and Garfunkel," she read aloud. "Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M. Never heard of them. Are they new?"

"Barb swears they're going to be the next big thing in folk rock," Lois insisted, giggling. "You know she's always had a good call for music. I trust her on this one. She said that you would like it." Barb waved her hands, unable to spew the appropriate words as she urged Lana onward with vague gesticulations. As their tongues and minds loosened, Mary Eunice thanked herself for abstaining from the drink. A soft beat came from the record player, and Lois and Barb danced; Lois was clumsy, and after a few rounds, Barb dragged at Lana, but Lana obstinately refused.

When the record ended and they had finished the last of the cake and wine, Barb and Lois excused themselves from the home. "We've got to go to Pat Joe's together sometime!" Barb snickered, wavering. As Mary Eunice went to show them out, Barb lunged at her; her breath carried a sour reek, causing her to cringe. A wandering hand cupped her bum and squeezed; Mary Eunice's whole face screwed up. Wet, liquor-sheened lips strained for her face. "I hope you'll accompany us, Sister." They headed for the corner of her lips.

Lana shoved her away with a stagger. "Paws off of my nun, Barb! Getcher hands off her ass!"

Face coloring a sickly white at the intrusion, Mary Eunice fell back, heart flopping around at the base of her throat. Barb's hands felt like enemy soldiers crossing the front line, trespassing on her body. "For fuck's sake," Lana grunted as Barb called something about learning to take a joke and
Lois dragged her along down the sidewalk. "Are you okay?"

Mary Eunice nodded, meek and silent, both big eyes fixed on Lana. "No, for real—she doesn't have any goddamn boundaries. It's a damn wonder she hasn't been lynched yet. It's a wonder that Lois hasn't kicked her ass out." Lana belched. "Oh god. I'm going to be sick tomorrow. Go on, you need to shower, you've got twigs in your hair yet. I can clean up."

She patted Mary Eunice's shoulder; Mary Eunice flinched at the contact and stared hard at the ground, legs pinched together and arms crossed. "I know, it's kind of hard to like her. They're both a little tactless. But we're all gay. If we don't have each other's backs, nobody else will take up for us." Lana's hands didn't send the volatile trembles through Mary Eunice's skin; her soft brown eyes didn't make Mary Eunice feel violated. As she relaxed under the warm touch, Lana offered her a wry smile. "And you're one of us now. Congratulations, Sister. You're an honorary dyke. Gay by association."

Mary Eunice lifted her head to meet Lana's eyes. The house had quieted with warmth and security once again. It was safe. "I've never been anything honorary before." Lana laughed aloud and started back into the living room to take care of the dirty dishes.

After she got out of the shower and combed her hair, Mary Eunice expected to find Lana in bed, but she saw no sign of her friend. "Lana?" The thick cotton gown hung around her ankles, solid gray and long-sleeved, as she rounded the corner, following the sound of music humming from the record player. Lana rested on the couch with her chin in her hand, both eyes fixed on a picture of Wendy on the wall. "Lana, it's bedtime."

The childish words drew her attention, and Lana scooted over, patting the cushion beside her on the couch. Mary Eunice sat like an obedient dog. "Every birthday," she mumbled, words slurred but thoughtful, "we buy each other a record. Done it like that since college." She brushed her hand through her hair, fingers catching on the tangles. "And every year, on our birthdays, Wendy and I dance to the new record."

Mary Eunice's teeth found her lower lip and waited for her to continue. "This is the first time since I was nineteen that I haven't danced at my own birthday party." A long, wistful sigh released from her lungs, and she lifted her head from her hand to rest it on the back of the couch. Her eyes swam with unshed tears where they gazed upward at the ceiling. "Fifteen years. That's a long time to love someone, Sister. All those birthday dances." A single tear rolled down her cheek, and her eyes pinched closed. Mary Eunice's heart clenched in her chest at the sight. "If I had known last year that I would never get another one, I would have held her just a little bit tighter."

Extending a tentative arm, Mary Eunice reached for a hug; she knew no words that could provide comfort. Lana leaned into her embrace and snuggled against her, warm and soft, face somewhat sticky from the tears and snot. "I couldn't dance with Barb." Her long eyelashes brushed Mary Eunice's skin, left little wet smears behind. "Knowing what she would make of it... Hell, she'd probably do me now if I spread my legs wide enough. I couldn't do that with her." Mary Eunice wrapped Lana deeper into her arms and held her; Lana's every shaking breath brought them closer together and then separated them once more. "I know you must think terribly of her. She loves Lois, really. They have a special relationship, but they would be sick without each other."

"You don't have to explain anything to me, Lana." She smoothed one hand over the tangled hair. "You don't owe me anything." A wry smile touched her lips. "And it doesn't make sense to me, anyway. I've never been in love." She paused once, considering, reflecting. "I married God when I was seventeen."

Lana took a measured breath to calm the quivering of her chest. "I'm sorry. I'm a drunk mess." She belched again, and her head lolled against Mary Eunice's shoulder. "And I would cut off my
own fingers to dance with Wendy again."

Mary Eunice considered for a long moment, lips pursed. "I don't know how to dance," she said, gauging Lana's expression with care. "But I'm not opposed to learning." Lana's lips parted, but no words came out, the alcohol causing a delay. "You're the only friend I have right now. You deserve a world more than what I could give you."

A sniveling laugh burst from Lana's mouth. "Oh, Sister, you're so kind. Won't Sister Jude think we're lewd?"

"What Sister Jude doesn't know won't hurt her."

"I think that's the most conniving thing I've ever heard you say." Mary Eunice ducked her head, but Lana took her hand and pulled her to her feet, full of offbeat swoons and staggers. "I dunno how to dance, either. You make it up as you go along." Lana placed a hand in the crook of her neck, another on her waist, and swayed to the slowing beat as one song bled into another.

Mary Eunice's hands matched Lana's and held her upright as they swung about on the tips of their toes, on the flats of their feet. Lana spun her once, and Mary Eunice ushered in a series of girlish giggles, provoking a similar sound from Lana, all musical and sweet. "*Come a runnin' down the stairs, pretty Peggy-o. Come a runnin' down the stairs, pretty Peggy-o. Come a runnin' down the stairs, combin' back your yellow hair. You're the prettiest little girl I've ever seen-o.*"

When they collapsed into the silence of their bed at long last, the cool space between them tingled with warmth until Lana filled it with her body, curling up close; her breath smelled like wine. "Thank you, Sister."

Mary Eunice faced her, gazing at the silhouette and piecing together the shadowy features of her face. "Happy birthday, Lana."
Wakefulness arrived in a twisted haze for Mary Eunice as Lana disentangled herself from the bedsheets and raced to the bathroom to vomit. She rolled in a slow pursuit, brain grappling for release from the tendrils of sleep, and her gorggy eyes and tangled hair caused her to question the hour while she warmed a washcloth in the sink. *She's going to want the Tylenol.* Mary Eunice dug around in the medicine cabinet before she found the bottle and placed it on the counter.

As she predicted, Lana moaned, "Jesus Christ, who let me drink so much last night?" and clutched at her head, fingers tangling in her sweaty, matted hair. "My head…" Mary Eunice swathed the sweat off of her face with the washcloth. "Why are you here? I did this to myself."

"I'd be a pretty bad friend if I lay in bed and listened to your suffering, wouldn't I?" Mary Eunice knelt beside her in the dark of the bathroom. Outside, a faint rain pattered onto the roof and shook the tree against the side of the house with the autumn breeze. "You feel a little warm. Do you think you can keep down some Tylenol?"

"That sounds divine." Lana closed the toilet lid and sat on it, hiding her eyes in her hands. "I drank too much. I drank enough for two of me." She belched. "You must imbibe next time. We can split the difference."

Mary Eunice poured three pills into her hand and filled the small sink glass with water before she handed them to Lana. "You'd be sorely disappointed. I can't hold alcohol well." Under Lana's incredulous eyes, her cheeks tinted pink. "I was a rebellious teenager once."

"I thought your idea of rebellion would be skipping a Hail Mary in your rosary." Lana took the pills and grunted her thanks. She sucked in a deep breath, and Mary Eunice waited patiently for her brain to catch up with the morning hour. "Oh, hell. The Monsignor is coming today. He's going to think I'm totally inept if he sees me like this."

"The Monsignor?" Mary Eunice's eyes fluttered wide with surprise. "You didn't tell me?"

"I was going to, but when I went outside, you were falling out of trees and had the lesbians flocking to the yard like sheep. If I'd left you out there much longer, we would've had every gay in Boston on the porch." Lana grappled for her hairbrush and began to snatch at her tangled locks. "Then I got shitfaced and it slipped my mind."

After Lana winced her way through several clumsy paws at her tangled hair, Mary Eunice interrupted. "Here, let me. You'll hurt your hair like that." She sectioned off Lana's hair and plucked through it gently. She held each lock so that it didn't tug at Lana's scalp.

Lana remarked, eyes drooping, "You're good at that."
With a smile, Mary Eunice explained, "I took care of my cousins when I was growing up." Her
voice had dropped to a low hush, reluctant to disturb Lana's migraine. "My aunt was always very
busy. I made sure that everyone looked presentable for school and church."

"Was this before or after the aforementioned rebellious teenage phase?" Lana teased her, a tired
glint to her eye, an upward curve upon her lips.

"Before. And during, I suppose." Mary Eunice tugged through another tangle. "I never shirked
my responsibilities."

Lana chuckled. "That's why you weren't good at drinking. The purpose of getting drunk is
forgetting all the terrible shit that real life entails." She followed a guiding hand so that Mary
Eunice could reach the top of her head. "Where are you from, Sister?"

"I was born in Annapolis," Mary Eunice answered, slow, reflecting and considering as she spoke.
"But I grew up in Boston with my Aunt Celest and her children. I don't remember my mother
well, or my father at all."

"What happened to them?" Lana asked out of reflex, her journalist's instinct overpowering her for
a moment; her teeth clamped onto her tongue, and she apologized. "You don't have to answer
that. I don't mean to pry." The brush ran smoothly through her hair; she sensed that Mary Eunice
had finished brushing and now simply toyed with it in thought.

"It's fine, Lana. I don't have anything to hide from you." Mary Eunice cleared her throat. "My
father was drafted into the war and never came home. I was five when he died. My mother took
her own life several months later." Lana followed her with her gaze until Mary Eunice pointed her
chin again, having begun to spin a braid into Lana's hair. "Aunt Celest was estranged from my
mother, so I was in the system for a few months before word got to her, and she came to claim
me."

"That's horrible." Mary Eunice spoke with the most nonchalant tone, like they discussed the
weather outside or the shade of a pretty dress. "No child should have to go through that."

"Lots of children did. I was lucky that someone cared enough to take me. There were others not
afforded that luxury."

Lana's brows quirked. "Is that how the world operates to you? That you aren't allowed to be sad
because other people have better reasons to be sad?" Mary Eunice shrugged, but her teeth had
begun to worry her bottom lip like they did when she felt the spotlight on her back. Lana knew
that she had struck a nerve. "Did Sister Jude tell you that being sad is an indulgence or
something ridiculous like that?"

Shaking her head, Mary Eunice corrected gently, "I learned that dwelling bitterly on the past was
not an effective way to handle my problems." She tied one pigtail, and Lana knew she would look
like a little girl when Mary Eunice finished. Nevertheless, she let the nun continue spinning the
next braid. "Where did you come from?"

"Georgia."

"You don't sound like you're from Georgia."

"I learned that I would never get a professional job if I sounded like a country hick in every
interview." Both of them chuckled at that, light like the rain and the wind against the house. "My
parents were very happy. Still are, I suppose. They decided they were happier without me."
"I'm sorry."

Lana inclined her eyebrows. "That's everyone's story. Our families don't want us, so we build our own." After a moment's hesitation, she continued, "Not unlike joining the church. We seek the security that other people couldn't provide. It just happened that my new family had Barb and yours had goddamn Sister Jude." With a snort, she added, "I guess every family has a weird cousin that no one wants to claim."

Mary Eunice laughed aloud at that, the girlish giggle that she had released last night while they danced. Her face glowed when she smiled, exuding the joy of her soul; the expression soothed Lana's burning insides as she remembered the hollow look the nun had borne when the Monsignor had dropped her off, practically nude and burning with fever. Was this the difference that ten days could make? She hadn't seen Mary Eunice like this inside Briarcliff ever, carefree and exuberant. But she supposed that years within those walls could stifle even the brightest souls. Her smile makes you feel whole again. The bold supposition caused her heart to skip a beat. Watch yourself. You can't trust her. She is still one of them. Lana didn't know the identity of them, except for the staff of Briarcliff, and she remembered with a twist in her gut all of the lies that Mary Eunice had told while under the demon's grasp. That wasn't her, Lana defended.

"Lana? Are you alright?" As she blinked back into reality, out of her own head, she focused upon Mary Eunice once again.

She's been nothing but kind. "Do you want to lie down while I make breakfast?" The other voice warned, You can't give her the chance to change that.

"No, I'm fine." Mary Eunice dropped the second pigtail after tying it, and Lana stood on rubbery legs. "I won't let you coddle me through a hangover." She took her toothbrush and slathered toothpaste on it liberally, and Mary Eunice left the bathroom; in the mirror peeking out the door frame, she undressed, and Lana walked away from the mirror before the pale planes of her back and the curve of her hips could become enticing. You're playing Russian roulette with her, living like this. She attempted to squash the newfound cynicism and allowed the sharp, cool toothpaste to burn her tongue in retribution.

After Lana dressed herself, she found Mary Eunice frying up some French toast and eggs, and in spite of herself, the scent of fresh food caused her to salivate. "What time is the Monsignor supposed to be here?"

"He didn't say." Lana's voice held the clipped tone that she had taken yesterday when speaking to the Monsignor, and Mary Eunice gave her a curious, probing look, wanting answers, too shy to ask. "I'm sorry. He and I might have had a disagreement on the telephone yesterday that ended our conversation prematurely." All the color drained out of Mary Eunice's face, and Lana rushed to defend herself. "It had nothing to do with you."

"Of course it had something to do with me. Why else would you be talking to the Monsignor?"

"Maybe I'm converting to Catholicism and joining your convent." Mary Eunice shot her a withering look, and Lana sighed; her sarcasm would buy her no favors. "The Monsignor doesn't want to tell you anything that you did while you were possessed." She tiptoed around the last word like a sleeping dog. Goosebumps appeared on Mary Eunice's arms at its utterance. "And I agree with him that you're happier this way. But I also know that confession is important to you. And it's not his information to withhold. He has no business playing God with your memories."

Mary Eunice flipped the French toast, quiet, both eyes fixed upon the sizzling pan as she considered, sucking on her bottom lip until it popped out. "I'm grateful that you value my faith. I thought that the Monsignor would understand..." Her brow furrowed. "But he is my authority. I can't challenge his word. God has granted him his position."
No, dammit, challenge him! He's up to something! Lana stifled the pressing thoughts at the center of her chest. "Sister," she said, hesitant, "I think that you know something the Monsignor doesn't want you to know. Something he doesn't want you to remember. Maybe something that could jeopardize his position in the church."

"How would I know anything that could harm the Monsignor?" She squashed the toast down onto the buttered pan with a bit too much strength, induced by the stress of Lana's words. "I—I don't remember anything! I see the pieces in my dreams and then it all breaks up again when I wake up!"

Tears pooled in her eyes, and she wiped at their corners. I shouldn't have brought it up. Lana regretted her words and placed a light hand on the inside of Mary Eunice's elbow. "Relax." Mary Eunice shuddered under her touch before she stilled. "You'll only stress yourself out if you panic over it." As Mary Eunice sucked in a deep breath through her nose, she flipped the toast onto the plates. "You were reading minds and teleporting. Even if you don't know anything, if the Monsignor has something to hide, he's going to be leery of you."

Lana took a plate of singed toast, but Mary Eunice waved her off, shaking her head. "Don't eat that. It's burned. I'll make another batch. That's going to be gross. Lana—" Making full eye contact, Lana took a large bite from it, unblinking as she chewed and swallowed. "That's—Why are you looking at me like that? That's somewhat unsettling."

She chuckled and poured herself a glass of orange juice. "Trying to get your mind off of things." Seating herself with her meal, she waited for Mary Eunice to join her. "My sister used to look at me like that when she took the last cookie out of the cookie jar and ate it in front of me."

"That's terrible." A small smile cut Mary Eunice's sullen expression, and Lana allowed herself a bit of reprieve.

"She was the princess of the family. She got what she wanted." Lana pushed around the soggy burned toast on her plate; she considered slathering it in syrup, but Mary Eunice didn't allow herself the indulgence of the sweet, so she decided to abstain as well.

"Did you only have a sister?"

"Oh, no. I was the oldest, and Frieda was born two years after me. Then we had Timothy and Roger, twins, and they caused more trouble than all the other children in the village put together. Mama decided she didn't want any more children after that." Lana chewed the gummy bread and gulped it, washing it down with the tang of the orange juice. "What about your cousins?"

Mary Eunice shrugged. She didn't have the stomach to eat the charred toast, so she chopped it up and pushed it around on the plate with her fork. "Aunt Celest wasn't exactly an aspirational woman. She had four children, but she never married. They all had different fathers." She sipped water from her glass to pause her speech. "Molly was two when Aunt Celest brought me home. Then she had Carol, and then Patricia, and then James. Aunt Celest had to work long hours to support all of us, so I took care of everyone. They were my best friends."

"I thought Jesus was your best friend." At Lana's quiet words, Mary Eunice chuckled, shaking her head. "Do you know where they are now? Any of them?"

With a shake of her head, Mary Eunice said, "No, I—I haven't heard from any of them in years. Briarcliff isn't exactly a place to bring your family for visiting hours." Lana nodded in agreement. "Molly used to write me regularly. She wanted to go to college, but I never got an invitation to her high school graduation."
"You could write her," Lana suggested. She went to wash her plate. "Or call her. I have a telephone directory. If they're still in the county, it should list their address and phone number."

Mary Eunice hesitated, lifting her head, astonished by the turn the conversation had taken. "Do—Do you think that that's a good idea?" she stammered. "I'm not sure—it's been so long now. I don't want to show up out of the blue."

Lana held her gaze evenly. "I think it's a fine idea." Smiling, she continued, "I'm sure they've missed you. They would be glad to hear from you." She took Mary Eunice's plate away. "I take it that you have less of a stomach for burned bread than I do. There are cornflakes in the cabinet, but they're probably stale sawdust by now." As she scrubbed off the plates, she mused, "We should go to the supermarket this weekend. Scraping by on gas station food is going to get fairly tiresome." The dangling pigtails banged on her cheeks, but the taut ties didn't cause her scalp to ache. "Saturday?" she suggested.

"I'll go whenever you want to go," Mary Eunice answered modestly. She took the dishes as Lana washed them and began to dry them with a towel. She put them up the cabinet where they had taken from them. "Are you going to write more today?"

"Yes, I think so." Lana washed her hands while Mary Eunice hung up the pan above the sink. "I'm going to go to the office sometime next week. My boss has some things he needs me to pick up." Mary Eunice's blue eyes followed her. "It's the nice way of telling me I have to work or I won't get paid. What a preposterous concept."

While they both chuckled at the sarcastic joke, a nervous titter to Mary Eunice's hands and lips, a motor rolled down the street outside. Lana went to the window to peer outside. "Shit. It's him. Do I look like I got shitfaced last night?"

Brow furrowing, Mary Eunice wondered, What does it matter? He isn't here to tell you how to babysit me. "You look fine," she promised, hands wiggling back and forth, fingers catching and separating into a funny, sweaty clasp. Lana went to answer the door; her footsteps syncopated against the thundering beat of Mary Eunice's heart, now increasing in tempo as the stark form of the Monsignor moved up the driveway with a cardboard box in his arms. Lana's words echoed in her mind in an inexplicable spin. "I think that you know something the Monsignor doesn't want you to know. Something he doesn't want you to remember." But no matter how many times she scanned her memory, she could not find the Monsignor's face, could not hear his voice, compared to Sister Jude and Dr. Arden, who appeared more times than she liked to consider.

"Good morning, Monsignor." At the dark tone to Lana's voice, Mary Eunice straightened a little, surprised at Lana's forthright unfriendliness. Lana had never treated her like that, so icy and uncaring. Lord, give me strength and calm Lana's spirit. She wished that she had her rosary; she had left it on the nightstand last night when she and Lana finally retired.

The misty weather hung gray and wet over the yard. "Miss Winters, Sister Mary Eunice." At the sound of his voice, a sharp ringing blazed between Mary Eunice's ears; she returned the cordial greeting, but she couldn't hear herself speak. The rainwater trickled down his temples in silvery rivulets. It looked like sweat. As he drew nearer, a scent exhaled off of him, all musty and salty, somehow familiar. That doesn't make any sense. "Forgive me if I can't..." The echo of his voice smeread all of his words, like someone had taken a finger over wet paint and blurred the lines.

Lana's gentle hand caught her by the elbow, and her lips moved. "Sister? Are you okay?" The deafness separating Mary Eunice from her voice caused her heart to flutter into a panic in her throat; she bobbed her head and swallowed hard.

The Monsignor rambled on; she didn't pull her gaze from him. Where her eyes touched his
exposed skin, it tinted red. He had deep scars on the back of each hand. "Enclosed a reference for
counseling, Mother Superior won't reassign until she's certain of spiritual welfare," and Lana's
hackle raised, but she had nothing to sputter in response, and Mary Eunice didn't grasp the
meaning of it all. That gross smell rolled off of the Monsignor's clothing. *How long has it been
since he showered?*

His brown eyes carried a darkness, a sensuality. *What is wrong with me? Where did that word
come from?* Her insides gnarled at the sight of him, hands and thighs sweating; her legs
inadvertently pinched together and refused to sever from one another. A sharp pain pulsed upward
from her groin. She winced and placed her hands on her abdomen. Eyes fluttering closed, the
world spun around her. Lana had become a blur, her chocolate eyes worrying upon Mary Eunice;
the Monsignor had taken notice of her as well.

"Sister Mary Eunice?" His voice dropped ice cubes down the back of her shirt. One scarred hand
took hers. The memory hazed from the gray mist of her mind into full clarity: the Monsignor tied
on his back, bound to the bed in which he lay, and her on top of him, the demon driving her every
movement. They were naked from the waist down. She clutched his erect penis, the skin soft but
flushed purple with sensation, and lowered herself upon his shaft. The pain from the entrance
would have caused Mary Eunice to double over and vomit, but the demon rode him without
hindrance, paying no heed to the physical agony and emotional anguish of her violated body and
vows. His face reddened before he splashed a sticky heat inside her body. "Sister?"

She ripped from his grasp and staggered backward. The world spun once—she spotted Lana's
face—with great black blots in all the important places, and then everything vanished into
blackness.

Lana dove forward to catch the white-faced nun before she struck the ground in a dead faint. The
heavy weight dragged her down to her knees, but she managed to keep Mary Eunice from busting
her head open. She let her rest on the carpet with a patient sigh, fighting against the rapid pulse of
her own heart. "I'm sorry, Monsignor. She's been well. I don't understand. Sister?" She patted
Mary Eunice's cheek, hoping to elicit some response from her. Mary Eunice shivered all over, but
she didn't awaken.

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing, Miss Winters—" He tittered, tugging his sleeves down over his scarred
hands. "I apologize, but I must be going. Urgent church matters—" *You don't give a shit about her.* The accusation burbled within Lana's chest, and she withheld it to watch him flee with
smoldering eyes; he did not bid farewell. *Something's got him unnerved.* Lana stood long enough
to lock the door behind him and took a pillow and a throw from the couch to cover Mary Eunice's
body where goosebumps shuddered all over her visible flesh.

Her hands grazed Mary Eunice's; the nun had white hands, dry and calloused in places from the
hours she had spent rolling dough in Briarcliff's kitchen. Her bony fingers had skinny, protruding
veins. She had short fingernails bitten down to the quick, a habit that Lana had noticed Mary
Eunice cursing herself for. "Sister?"

Mary Eunice stirred with a faint flutter to her eyelids, a downward twist overcoming her lips. She
uttered a low groan and pinched up her face, where pink discolored her skin, and tears squeezed
out of the corners of her eyes in dribbles. Lana placed a hand upon her cheek, but Mary Eunice
recoiled, body folding at the middle. Her hands tremored, and Lana reached to still them, but she
snatched away and covered her groin. A weeping cry rose from her parted pink lips as she curled
up into a ball. "Sister," Lana cautioned, "he's gone. You're safe."

As Lana reached to wipe away her tears, Mary Eunice recoiled. "Don't touch me!" Her vehement
voice shuddered with the sudden shout. She rocked herself upon the floor. Lana's hands retreated,
searching for another path to comfort the shaking woman. Plucking her lip between her teeth, she
wondered if the inconsolable tears would pass like a storm. *I can't sit here and do nothing.* Instead, she dragged the small blanket up over Mary Eunice's shoulder, tucked it tighter around her. A sniveling whimper arose in response.

"I'm not going to hurt you." Lana scanned her, retreating into an invisible shell like a terrified turtle. "It's okay." Her every instinct wanted to provide a hug and a gentle hand, things Lana had yearned for but not received in her darkest hours.

At the low tone of her voice, Mary Eunice quieted a little. Her back heaved with trembling breaths; she couldn't steady them for all of the quivering in the rest of her body. "Lana?" She drew the word out into a choking note, almost unintelligible from the tremor in her chest. One red-rimmed blue eye peered up from the safety of the fetal position. "It hurts."

"What hurts?" Lana opened one hand, let it rest on the ground beside her. Mary Eunice followed it with her eyes but neither accepted it nor denied it. "What did you remember?"

She tensed all over, every synapse wiring her to defend herself. Her face corkscrewed in fear and pain. "I can't—I don't—I can't—"

Her muffled, broken wail tingly on the air and caused goosebumps to erupt over Lana's arms and legs. "It's okay," she soothed. "You don't have to tell me." She gingerly rested her hand upon Mary Eunice's shoulder. "Come here. Sit up. You can't lie in the floor all day." The muscles beneath her hand worked into an uncomfortable series of twitches like a horse trying to dislodge a fly from its back. Mary Eunice rose obediently into a sitting position and leaned against the wall; she folded her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, resting her chin on her knees. Her eyes fell closed again, and her pink lips wriggled like worms ripped from the earth and exposed to the sunlight, the tears and snot rolling over them. Lana grappled for something intelligent to say. "What can I do?" she pressed. "How can I help?"

Mary Eunice mewled a whimper in the back of her throat and hugged herself tighter; her chest heaved too fast, and she choked on the thick saliva in her mouth as she spoke. "Stay, please?" She managed to lift her watery eyes to Lana. When she opened them, the tears fell without any hindrance, less like drops and more like a stream, dripping miserably off of her chin upon her knees.

"As long as you need me," Lana promised. She leaned against the wall as well, tipping her head up and gazing at the closed front door. The untouched box of Mary Eunice's things grabbed her attention, and she wondered what they had deigned to send her. Hideous, stained clothing like they had provided for the inmates? Personal items? Had they cleared out her chamber or sorted through all of her things in order to provide only the bare necessities?

The blue eyes lingered on Lana's cheek; they probed her skin until she met them, curious as to their fixation upon her. "It's okay." Then, slowly, Mary Eunice dropped her head upon Lana's shoulder. Lana slid her arm around her, and at the welcoming gesture, her building resolve crumbled again into fresher tears, losing control. As she buckled upon Lana, she muffled her cries with one hand, the other returning to her groin. "It's okay," Lana repeated, a mantra, unable to work past that phrase. She needed to impress it upon Mary Eunice's mind. "I've got you. I won't let anything hurt you." She pulled Mary Eunice closer and embraced her.

Her fingers curled into Lana's shirt and clutched like a child to her blanket. "I know." The smallness of her voice, between snifflies and hiccups, made Lana rub a circle on the small of her back. "I'm sorry." The words caused her to break into snivels again, and Lana didn't rush to correct her until she had quieted into the soft tears once more.

"You've done nothing wrong." Mary Eunice shook her head, everything on her face twisting with
revulsion. Lana smoothed a hand over her hair. "What's the matter?"

"I don't—" A hiccup cut her off. "I don't deserve you." She curled up, all small and flushed in the face and shivering, one hand fixed upon Lana's shirt and the other cupping her groin in some attempt to protect long-lost purity. "I'm so dirty—I hurt everyone—"

"That's not true." Lana's tone lacked the conviction she intended for it to hold; for all of the comfort that she wanted to grant Mary Eunice, she could not forget the sadistic person who had stalked the halls of Briarcliff in this same skin. Those hands which had held her last night to the tune of Simon and Garfunkel had also electrocuted Jude's memories away. That face, which shed sunlight when it found joy, had smirked upon the torment around her. Lana closed her eyes and chased those thoughts away. Being an asshole right now will not help her. "It wasn't you. I know that."

Lana plucked at Mary Eunice's fingers, loosened them from the front of her shirt and squeezed them in her own hand. Another weak sob shuddered forth, but Mary Eunice had cried herself dry, face all wet and sticky. With her eyelids pinched tightly closed, face hidden in the crook of Lana's arm, she whispered, "I raped the Monsignor."

The words spoken aloud sent her reeling to the kitchen trashcan, where she began to dry heave. Lana didn't pursue, both hands reaching upward to her temples, eyes wide with disbelief. When I agreed to take her, they didn't say she was a murderer-rapist with retrograde amnesia. Lana swallowed the bile that burned at the back of her throat and stood on sleepy legs to get Mary Eunice a glass of water. She warmed a paper towel in the sink and brought them back to her; with the paper towel, she mopped up Mary Eunice's sticky face.

"I have to revoke my vows," she whispered, cheek resting on the wooden rim of the trashcan. "I can't go on—I'm a disgrace—" She hiccuped and shivered all over. "I can't get it out of my head—what it felt like—I don't want to remember!" Lana held her hair out of her sweaty face as she began to heave again, but her empty stomach had nothing to relieve. She crumpled on her knees. "It hurts." Her hands covered her crotch, and she didn't look at Lana.

"I know." Lana squatted beside her, pushing the glass of water into her hand. "Drink. You'll feel better." She threw away the wet paper towel as Mary Eunice obediently sipped from the glass. "I know you're scared." Mary Eunice swallowed hard, audibly. "And I know you're worried about your vows. But—Sister, is there any possibility that you're pregnant?"

"W-What?"

Oh, dear Jesus, please tell me that you know where babies come from. "Is it possible that he got you pregnant?"

"I—I don't know."

I'll take that as a yes. Lana had to force herself to keep her voice steady, to keep from grabbing Mary Eunice by the shoulders and shaking her. "When did you have your last period?" Her heartbeat thrashed about irregularly. "Do you remember?" Mary Eunice shook her head. "When did this happen?" As her face crumpled into a distraught, pink bundle, Lana allowed a soft sigh to rush through her nose, keeping herself steady; she offered Mary Eunice another hug, and the nun accepted it, tight and close. "It's okay. I'll make you a doctor's appointment for next week, and we can decide where to go from there. Okay?"

Mary Eunice bobbed her head, and Lana wiped her tears away with her thumbs. We could name the baby Scandal, for all of the fucked up shit that has gone down recently. She swallowed her vitriol. "You're going to be fine."
In a bare whisper, Mary Eunice croaked, "I know." Lana blinked, startled by the assured answer, and sought eye contact, perplexed. "I'm with you, Lana."

The words settled in the pit of her stomach and warmed there. "Damn straight. And if anybody decides to mess with you, I'll fuck them up."

Mary Eunice couldn't manage a smile, but the emptiness in her eyes dulled slightly. "I don't deserve your friendship."

"You deserve everything that I can give you." Lana held her gaze, warm and deliberate, and to her surprise, Mary Eunice didn't pull away and avert her eyes; she allowed Lana to bore into her with all of her conviction. "Do you want to take a shower?" With pursed lips, Mary Eunice nodded. Gingerly, she disentangled herself from Lana; her limbs quivered, all rubbery and inconsistent, when she stood, and Lana steadied her at the waist until she was sturdy on her own feet. "I'll make us some lunch, okay?"

Mary Eunice staggered off to the bathroom, vision misty with the wet of her eyes and the throbbing behind them. She left the door cracked open and gazed at herself in the mirror, face all red and patchy and snotty, limbs trembling, hair framing her face in strings. Not pretty like Lana. She didn't think it in a jealous way—she had no reason to envy beauty—but rather an observation. Lana had a warm presence; her smell and touch made Mary Eunice feel secure. Her chocolate eyes smothered her like a blanket and protected her.

She is a blessing I do not deserve.

Abandoning her clothing was a chore that brought with it the scenes that Lana's voice had managed to chase away. The Monsignor appeared with his bandaged hands and his pitiful, begging face all gnarled from resisting the pleasure that she imposed upon him. She made the Sign of the Cross. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth…" The words scrolled across her mind like she read them from a book, typed characters upon a page, and the Monsignor's moans in her memory quieted to background noise.

She had never examined her nude body with any scrutiny; it made her feel perverted. But when she looked at herself in the mirror, her ribs lined the sides of her chest, her collarbones protruding, she wondered when she had begun to look so sickly. When had her skin discolored from peach to eggshell? When had she lost the freckles that once crossed the bridge of her nose? When had her hair lost its luster? Her small breasts carried a slight sag, nipples hard and protruding from the cold.

One hand smoothed down her abdomen. Pregnant? The word tasted dirty on her tongue. Pregnant and unwed, just like Aunt Celest, except that Mary Eunice assumed Aunt Celest had never managed to bed a priest—and certainly had never raped anyone. She lifted the hand from her squishy belly. She had never wanted children, even before she took her vows; she had spent too much of her childhood wiping noses and cleaning up messes to aspire to do the same as an adult. Pregnant like Lana.

She couldn't do what Lana was planning, though. An abortion was unthinkable. Any child inside her body was safe, regardless of the circumstances surrounding its creation. You're ahead of yourself, she cautioned, pinching the tip of her tongue between her lips. You can worry about a baby once you know you're having one. The rational voice in her head sounded just like Lana, witty but gentle, caring but firm.

Her eyes wandered southward on her reflection, the tuft of wiry, dark cream hair that protruded from between her thighs. The same hand that had touched her stomach went to her groin, but the moment her fingers grazed the kinky hair, she saw the Monsignor, felt him pushing into her body, so foreign and unwelcome. She retreated and continued her prayer more fervently. Still, a rogue thought curled in her head. Does Lana have hair, too?
You're disgusting! Mary Eunice whirled away from the mirror and turned on the shower; she jumped beneath the frigid stream of water and paid it no heed. As long as she shivered, she couldn't think about Lana, about her body, about the refuge her voice and arms and smell provided for Mary Eunice. Under the cold water, she could forget that anyone cared, and with self-hate fueled by years of practice, she purified herself, reminded herself of her own filth and folly and weakness. Sister Jude would not have tolerated it.

When she emerged from the shower, she felt no cleaner; she had prayed the rosary, but it gave her no solace. She forced herself to think of anything other than Lana, but knowing that she would encounter her again in only a few minutes did not help matters. It burbled inside her like a craving. I must deny myself. I cannot succumb. Somehow, though, she already knew that she would, that it was inevitable. Mary Eunice was not reckoning against her own desires—she could have done that with ease. She was in the business of depriving herself of all things good. She was reckoning against Lana Winters, who would think that any resolve against a friendship was idiotic and who would somehow manage to change her mind. And she could not repay Lana's kindness with coldness, with rejection. No, separating herself from Lana would not work.

What did it matter? She had already violated her vows of chastity; she could not hold her title any longer. That frightened her the most, leaving her life, her vows, her poverty and obedience that she had maintained so faithfully for a decade now. I must seek counsel. But with whom? Anything spoken in confession was private; it could not jeopardize her or the Monsignor. A priest would give her his honest answer, wise guidance, as he was commanded.

Mary Eunice wasn't certain she wanted an honest answer. She wanted reassurance, even a comforting lie. So, as she left the bathroom and found Lana on the couch, listening to Simon and Garfunkel with two plates of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and two glasses of milk, she allowed herself to relax into a neutral expression, shoulders sagging low. "You look cold," Lana observed. "Come here, sit down." Mary Eunice obeyed, sinking upon the couch beside Lana, who pushed the plate into her lap. "I was going to grill them, but I decided that we had already had burnt bread for breakfast."

"You would grill a PB and J?" Mary Eunice ogled at her, surprised by Lana's choice in food. Lana nodded. "Er… Why?"

"Why not?" Lana smiled, small but genuine, and the expression soothed Mary Eunice's troubled soul; it meant forgiveness. She had not earned nor requested it, but she received it nonetheless. Lord, thank You for blessing me with Lana. She is a better friend than I have ever desired, more than I deserve, for Your mercy. "I'm from the South. We also eat pimiento cheese sandwiches and fry things that aren't chicken like they're chicken."

With a meager smile, Mary Eunice dropped her eyes to the sandwich. Lana had cut off the crust for her. Did I tell her? "I'm glad you can't cook." Lana chuckled at that and took a bite out of her meal. Mary Eunice followed meekly, beginning in nibbles. "Thank you, Lana. I—I couldn't begin to tell you how much your friendship means to me."

Lana held her gaze, deliberate and genuine, and Mary Eunice watched her lips twitch, still, and twitch again, searching for words that she could not provide. She has her own scars, probably far more than mine. She gingerly took Lana's hand and squeezed it. Lana squeezed her hand in return, and they understood one another in the thought. "Do you want to watch the news or listen to Simon and Garfunkel?"

The abrupt change of subject did not startle Mary Eunice. "Walter Cronkite likes to tell us everything wrong with the world. He adds a lot to my prayer list."

As she spoke, the record spun onward, singing in the most peaceful voices, "Now the sun has
come to Earth, shrouded in a mushroom cloud of death. Death comes in a blinding flash of hellish heat and leaves a smear of ash." Lana inclined an eyebrow. "And the music is better?"

Blushing, Mary Eunice averted her eyes. "At least they sing about Jesus before they talk about all that." Lana laughed aloud and sipped her milk, rubbing her thumb on the back of Mary Eunice's hand. "Is that true, though? Are we really going to get—bombed?"

"I'm a journalist, not a fortune teller." Lana put her plate down on the end table, but as Mary Eunice's eyes trailed after her, requesting a deeper answer, she cleared her throat. "Right. You spent ten years without exposure to all this nastiness." Mary Eunice watched her, breath bated. "I *am* a journalist, so I'll tell you this. We get paid by publicity. Scary shit sells. Of course, it has to be true scary shit, but as part of the consuming public, you are going to hear a lot more about what the Soviet Union is planning on claiming next than, say, some guy on Main Street giving out free hugs with a sign that says, 'Make love, not war.' You understand?" Mary Eunice bobbed her head in agreement, and Lana persevered, "So maybe we *will* get nuked. It's not for me to say. But I'm not afraid of it ending like that."

Skepticism laced her tone as Mary Eunice pressed, disbelieving, "You're not?"

Lana shook her head. "I worry about things I can control. If a missile vaporizes my body, then it's over. There's nothing that I can do about it." She downed the rest of her milk and put the glass with the plate on the end table. "What do you have to worry about? Your soul is saved."

"But yours isn't." The words slipped unintentionally from Mary Eunice's lips, and as Lana narrowed her eyes, she regretted thinking them. *And I'm not so sure about my own, to be honest.* The tips of her ears burned in shame. *I'm not even certain I have a soul anymore.* So many parts of her were missing, the parts that had once tingled with fulfillment when she prayed, the places that God filled with His love and guidance now vacant and weeping when she was alone. The wounds hadn't closed yet, but Lana's presence stuffed them with gauze and disinfected them like a strong antibiotic.

"Is this the part where you try to convert me?"

"No." Mary Eunice finished the last crisp of her sandwich. "I didn't mean it that way."

Lana's eyebrows quirked. "Then how did you mean it?"

Quietly, she admitted, "I don't think I will like heaven as much if you're not there." She looked at Lana, a little shy.

"That is the sweetest, most Catholic thing that anyone has ever said to me." Lana grinned. "But I'm pretty sure that there will be so much good shit up there that you won't miss me for a minute."

Mary Eunice entertained her words, trying to consider an appropriate response while her belly burbled with trouble. "Lana, can I ask your—your honest opinion?" Lana quieted from her self-deprecating joke, expression darkening as she focused into a nod. "Should I… Do you think I should revoke my vows?"

Hesitant, Lana replied, "You know that I am not a Catholic, Sister." Mary Eunice nodded, slowly; she did not withdraw her question. Lana cleared her throat. "The Monsignor clearly hasn't left his position, correct?" Inclining one eyebrow, Lana pressed, "So he hasn't seen it as a matter of urgency. You would do well to model in his example." She squeezed Mary Eunice's hand. "That's my opinion, Sister. I know you value your faith and virtue. But this doesn't mean you have to give those things up. The Monsignor is the only one who knows, and he can't expose you without exposing himself."
I knew she would know what to say. Her shoulders relaxed. Lana could reassure her even in the most tumultuous of times. In a soft voice, she uttered her thanks, rolling over the words and reckoning them with her faith and vows. Lana nodded to her, collecting the empty plates and glasses. "I'm going to write now. Shout if you need something."

Mary Eunice straightened abruptly. "I—I'll do the dishes. You have a book to write." She took the plates from Lana, hushing her protest. "Let me. I need to busy my hands. I'm going to go mad if I don't do something." Lana hesitated a moment before she allowed Mary Eunice to take the plates from her. "Thank you."

"You can unpack your things in the bedroom. If you're opening that can of worms today, anyway."

And indeed, once Mary Eunice had washed the dishes and entertained herself by dusting all of the living room furniture and sweeping the kitchen and front porch and putting a load of laundry to wash, she found herself confronted with that particular can of worms; it intimidated her so much that she lingered in the kitchen, wondering if she could start dinner or mop the bathroom, for a full five minutes before she steeled herself and went to the box that the Monsignor had brought.

It was innocent enough, but she sat in the living room so that she could see into Lana's small office. With Lana nearby, she would keep her wits about her. The tapping of fingers upon a typewriter soothed her wandering spirit as she opened the box.

Someone had packed it with care. On top, someone had scrawled, "Fr. Joseph, Cathedral of the Holy Cross," with a phone number. "Offers faith-based therapy. Mother Claudia requests five months weekly appointments before you can return to service." Beneath that, she had her Bible and rosary; she scooped both of those things out with delight, deeply inhaling the fragrance of her cherished book, fingers teasing over the wooden beads. Under her Bible, she found her prayer journal. This, she seized with hesitance, uncertain if she dared open the cover to see what the demon had done to her thoughts, written to God almost every night since she was appointed to Briarcliff. She placed it aside.

Gaudy, golden earrings with heavy rubies glowed next, and at the sight of them, her belly turned. These came from Dr. Arden. She saw him giving them to her, solemn face drooping with weariness; his lips moved, but she could not hear the voice explaining them to her. She recalled only the darkness that exuded from them. Gulping, she lifted her head, eyes wandering to where Lana worked. I shouldn't interrupt her work. Mary Eunice used the hem of her shirt to pinch the earrings out of the box and place them on the end table; she didn't want to touch them with her bare hands.

Her small wallet of saint medals jingled, and she put it beside her Bible. At the very bottom of the box, a black habit was folded, tucked and coated in dust. Brightening with delight, Mary Eunice scooped it out and shook it out, flicking off the lint and hair from its rough surface. Then, not hesitating a moment longer, she scrambled into it, covering her hair, flinging her arms into the sleeves. It sagged from her frame; she had sewn her old habit by hand, and this one was not the same, but it still settled across her shoulders like a comforting arm.

There's no such thing as a pregnant nun. And with that single thought, the comforting arm became a crushing vice around her neck; she gulped and wrung her hand through the rosary. Lord, I know all things are in Your will as You command, and I will accept my burden as You give it. But if I have any say in the matter, I would really prefer not to have a baby. She smoothed one hand over the front of her habit, hadn't had any cravings, but she also had the emotional consistency of chopped nuts.

Mary Eunice packed all of the things back into the box and slid them under the side of the bed that
had been deemed hers since her arrival; she returned Wendy’s Bible and crucifix to the box that Lana had given her on the first night, but at the sight of the rosary, she hesitated. She liked praying with it. Lana had given it to her. *I'll ask her, sometime, if I could keep it.*

Once she cooked dinner, boiled chicken and noodles, she and Lana sat at the small kitchen table. "Are you going to wear that all the time now?" Lana asked, a genuine question as she regarded Mary Eunice. She drank a fizzy brown cola.

"Oh—" Mary Eunice looked down at her black front. "No, I don't think so. I don't have a reason to. I just missed having one." She inhaled deeply in the fabric. The gathered dust in it caused her to sneeze, and Lana laughed.

"Looks like it needs washed before you wear it again." She spun her noodles around her fork, but her eyes darted around, constantly checking that Mary Eunice hadn't moved, and her fingers drummed upon the table in a rapid succession. *Is she afraid of something?*

Lana's palpable nervousness transmitted to Mary Eunice; she glanced over her shoulder several times to ensure that nothing had appeared at the window, as Lana kept looking past her. *Should I ask her?* No, she couldn't; that was too invasive. "Are you okay?" she hedged instead.

"Of course!" Lana's answer came too quickly, tone holding a forced cheer, and a shadow passed over her face as she regarded Mary Eunice.

*Oh no. It's me.* She gulped the sudden lump that budded in her throat and stuffed another fork full of pasta into her mouth to keep herself from calling out Lana's fear directly. *Stupid stupid stupid.* Of course Lana didn't want to see her in a habit. The demon had used her security blanket as a shield against scrutiny, to mask evil in a face of purity, and had victimized so many in the same outfit. "Okay," she agreed aloud. But when they finished eating and Lana went to shower, Mary Eunice stripped herself of the habit and put it under the bed with the rest of her things. She wouldn't torment Lana, no matter how much she liked wearing her habit; she could wear anything in the closet that had some modesty.

When Lana got out of the shower, Mary Eunice prayed her rosary at the bedside while Lana read a novel, and once she finished her prayer, she crawled into the bed beside her friend. "Did you get much written today?" she ventured, meek as sleep threatened on the horizon.

"I finished chapter two." Lana closed the book and placed it on the bedside table. "Is your burn feeling better?"

"It's peeling." After a moment's consideration, Mary Eunice pressed, "Will you let me read it when it's done?"

Lana grinned, eyes half-closed. "No, I'm writing an entire book to entertain myself. No one can ever read it, and I'll make no money on it whatsoever." The lamp flicked off, and she relaxed on her back; Mary Eunice scooted a little nearer, but she left a comfortable gap between their bodies. "Good night, Sister."

It occurred to her that Lana had never called her by her name. *And she probably never will.* To Lana, she would always be "Sister". She didn't know how she felt about that. "Good night, Lana." Within minutes, Lana's breath hiccuped into the broken patterns that she carried while she slept. But Mary Eunice could not still her mind, now worrying over the coming morning; the day had carried her away, and she had not decided what to do about the abortion that Lana was scheduled to receive.

She needed to support Lana. Lana had done too much for her to warrant anything else. One hand
reached out, rested upon the soft of Lana’s abdomen. "I'll go with you," she promised the sleeping woman. "You don't deserve to be alone." Lana stirred, turning her head, and mumbled something under her breath. Mary Eunice shushed her. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep.”

"You okay?" slurred Lana.

"Mhm." Lana snuggled closer and placed one warm hand on top of Mary Eunice's, fingers twining together on her stomach. When her breath settled again, Mary Eunice closed her eyes, but she could not sleep; she wanted to make sure that she held Lana's hand as long as it was desired of her.
When Lana awoke the next morning, morning light gray through the window, she was nestled in the crook of Mary Eunice's body. *Spooning with a damn nun. I can cross that off the bucket list.* Their hands had clasped around her chest, and she worked to lift Mary Eunice's arm without waking her. As she slid from the bed, she replaced her body with a pillow for Mary Eunice to hug. This would go much more smoothly if she managed to escape while Mary Eunice slept; she could leave a note, and Mary Eunice would never suspect otherwise.

Of course, she had prepared a lie, but she didn't want to lie to her face, didn't want to pin that dishonesty upon her sleeve, didn't want to insert the secret in their friendship. Lana had so few people who she trusted intimately and totally. The thought of violating the honesty, the faith, that she and Mary Eunice had established so far made her belly ache. She closed the door to the bathroom to block the light and brushed her hair and her teeth, touched her face with makeup to add a little color to her gray complexion. Nervousness quelled in her chest. *This nightmare will be over soon.* She pinched the sides of the counter and gazed at her reflection in the mirror, scrubbed clean by Mary Eunice. Her tired eyes, drawn lips, made her wonder if the nightmare would ever end, or if she had found the transitional period between one frightening moment and the next.

Pulse quickening as the seconds ticked onward, Lana left the bathroom and picked through the chest of drawers in silence to find an outfit. Mary Eunice had rolled over, back to Lana, and drawn the covers up over her head; none of her golden hair appeared from beneath them. *She looks cold.* Lana worried her lower lip as she slipped into a pair of pants and a long—sleeved shirt. *What if she has a nightmare? What if she faints again?* She took the notepad off of her nightstand and scrawled a note.

"I have an appointment this morning. I'll be back by noon. Keep the door and windows locked." Lana nibbled on the back of her pen while she considered what else to add. "If there's an emergency, call the operator. Stay warm." She signed her name and placed it on the nightstand where she hoped Mary Eunice would find it when she awoke. A horrifying vision slinked into her brain—a shadowy man sneaking around the house, busting in the door, stealing a defenseless Mary Eunice or stabbing her or raping her or all of those things—*Oh, for god's sake, Lana, chill out.* A large lump budded in her throat, and she forced herself to leave the bedroom without stealing a second glance back at the sleeping woman. Nothing would hurt Mary Eunice while she was gone, and if she lingered on those suppositions, she would only upset herself.

Rain pattered on the rooftop, another bleary day, and Lana hesitated in the hallway to look at the pictures mounted on the wall. Mary Eunice had dusted them and changed the frames of the ones that had cracked; she could see Wendy's face clearly, if cast in darkness. "I wish you were here now," she whispered. Wind assailed the side of the house. *Mary Eunice doesn't like storms.* But Lana had resigned herself to this operation, had promised herself that she would not carry Bloody Face's child, and she had promised Wendy, too. What kind of lover was she if she lived in this house that they had bought together, that they had shared as partners, and birthed the son of the man who had skinned Wendy's corpse and stolen her teeth? "I love you."
The wind and the rain outside ate her whispered words. The temperature of the house had dropped, and a cold shiver trickled down her spine. Lana ripped herself from the picture of Wendy and, arms wrapping around her middle, headed up the hall into the living room.

Mary Eunice sat on the couch, on the edge of the cushion, hands in her lap and face pensive. Lana halted in her tracks, and her breath tightened in her throat. "Sister," she greeted. Where did you come from? "I thought you were asleep." Chasing the stiffness out of her voice was a struggle. Her toes curled into the carpet. "I—I have an appointment—"

"I know where you're going, Lana."

Lana set her jaw. She remembered, and she didn't tell me. Betrayal wriggled in the pit of her stomach, chilly and bitter. "Don't try to change my mind. This is none of your business."

Pink lips trembling, a sad earnestness twisted Mary Eunice's face. "I don't want to change your mind. If I did, I would've started before now." Lana's tense shoulders refused to relax even as she pushed them down. "You're my only friend, and I—I know what you're doing isn't exactly safe or legal." Narrow eyes scrutinizing the nun, Mary Eunice wriggled beneath her critical gaze, but she didn't buckle. "I've made my peace with what you've chosen to do. I want to go with you."

"No." Lana spat the word, and, storming past her, spotted her shoes by the front door. If she could get to her shoes and her keys, she could leave—and she could deal with Mary Eunice later.

Mary Eunice rushed after her. "Lana, please." Her voice shook. "I know if it were me, you wouldn't leave me alone. You don't deserve to go through this by yourself anymore!"

"You expect me to trust you?" The glittering layer of tears threatened to shed, but Lana bit the inside of her cheek hard. She wouldn't cry over this. "When did you remember? When did you figure it out?"

Mary Eunice's resolve against crying was much weaker than Lana's; she had wet cheeks already. "Last Tuesday night," she whispered, "while it was storming." She swallowed hard. "I didn't mean to mislead you. I thought, maybe, you would tell me yourself, and I—" Her voice choked to a halt while she sucked in a calming breath. Her shoulders heaved with them, all twitchy and unsteady. "I didn't want to remind you of how terrible I was when I wasn't myself." She searched Lana's face with a silent plea. "I'm sorry. I can't stand the thought of you on some table with some strange person and—no one there to hold your hand and tell you it will all be okay. You're all I've got left. You deserve more than I could ever hope to give you." Her flushed face crumpled with tears.

The genuine, innocent persistence to Mary Eunice's words sent Lana's belly smoldering. Lying back on a metal table, legs spread to a strange woman with metallic utensils prepared to probe her innards about. She wiped off her sweaty hands on the front of her shirt, returning her arms to their place, coiled around her middle for security. The betrayed pain in her gut hadn't faded yet, but it had lost its piercing edge at the contrite tears. Her thick tongue rested, dry, at the base of her mouth, so she bobbed her head, unable to form words. Mary Eunice swept her into an embrace; with her eyes closed, Lana inhaled the scent of Mary Eunice's hair. She never wore perfume, but she smelled like the rain, crisp and cool. The swell of her small breasts pushed against Lana's chest. Lana hugged her back with hesitance.

The time that they held one another stretched onward, each resting her chin on the other's shoulder. The weather outside provided a soft background noise to their embrace, and under it, like a prayer, Mary Eunice murmured, "Thank you," right against her earlobe.

Lana severed the hug to look at her face. Mary Eunice dabbed a single tear off of Lana's cheek.
with her thumb; she hadn't realized that she had let one fall. "Are you sure you want to do this?" The words tumbled from her lips, filled with doubt.

"I've never been more sure of anything before in my life." Mary Eunice's hand dropped from Lana's cheek. "I want to be with you. Wherever you are. If you'll have me."

_You are the most committed person I have ever met._ Lana bit her tongue to keep from speaking prematurely. _If you weren't God's, who would have earned your loyalty? Who would have deserved it?_ "You're welcome with me. But it's not going to be pretty."

"I saw a lot of ugly things at Briarcliff. I think I can take it." Mary Eunice had a small smile, touched by anxiety and desperation. She took one of Lana's hands and clutched it, the fingers chilled; she rolled them into the roughness of her palm to warm them. "We're going to be late if we wait much longer."

Lana almost expected her to suggest a change of mind, but she didn't. "Right." She drew her hand back and put on her shoes, took her car keys and umbrella. "Where did you learn to wrap pillows up to look like a body?"

"My cousin, Molly, liked to sneak out a lot. She fooled me and Aunt Celest all the time with that trick." She waited on the front step while Lana locked the front door. The rain fell in an inconsistent mist of dribbles, and a chill coated the land, the sky gray. Wet leaves soaked the overgrown yard.

"Clever." They walked to the car and drove in silence, each absorbed in her own thoughts; out of the corner of her eye, Lana watched Mary Eunice toy with the rosary that she had stored in her pocket, and she wondered if Mary Eunice had lied about making peace with this decision. _How much will she pray for being a willing accomplice to murder? How will she amend for that?_ Part of Lana shifted, uncertain if she had done the right thing by letting Mary Eunice come along. She didn't want this on another person's conscience. But the idea of company, a comforting face beside her, enticed Lana so that she put aside her grievances and her martyrdom for a little self-indulgence.

She parked on the street facing the apartment building that they were going to enter. Mary Eunice shoved her rosary deep into her pocket; she seemed to understand that an illegal abortion doctor would have a few qualms against a woman clutching a rosary on the front step. "I gave her a false name," Lana said. Mary Eunice's eyes fluttered to her in surprise. "I didn't want to be identified." She paused. "Just—whatever you do, don't introduce yourself as a nun, okay?"

Mary Eunice nodded. "Call me Christine." She didn't look anxious; in fact, she wore an incredibly calm face, peaceful. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Lana swung out of the car and locked it, her purse secure over her shoulder. She met Mary Eunice on the other side with the umbrella. Mary Eunice's arm brushed against hers as they walked side by side around the building into a wet alley. At its end, a homeless man sheltered himself with a cardboard box. Lana led the way up a narrow flight of stairs and entered the building, where she folded up the umbrella. Mary Eunice took it from her. "Apartment 282."

The carpet padded their footsteps until they reached the end of the hall, where a door held the number 282. Lana knocked upon it. A few seconds later, it opened, caught by a chain lock. "Yes?" answered a woman on the other side, one leery eye pressed to the gap.

"Dr. Sullivan? I'm Jane Summers. I spoke with you on Wednesday." The eye moved to Mary Eunice, but surprisingly, the blonde didn't buckle and blush and avert her eyes; she held the gaze steady, shifting nearer to Lana in the empty space. "This is my friend, Christine. She's here to——"
The doctor opened the door. "To make sure I don't cut you up and sell your parts on the black market, yes. Come inside." She ushered them into the small apartment. Once she had closed the door and locked it behind them. "Most women bring a friend or a partner. I can only imagine the types of people who are in this business." Lana's jaw tightened, and Mary Eunice's fingers touched the inside of her forearm, not quite proprietary, but rather defensive as she regarded the talkative, cheery doctor. "Please, Miss Summers, come in here."

The parlor passed into a living room, and off of that hung a small room, the size of Lana's office; inside, the walls were gray. She appraised the futon, newspapers spread across it. To soak up the blood, she realized dimly, and her breath hitched in her throat. The doctor had a tray of utensils which Lana did not look at, certain that she could not stomach those things going inside her body if she considered them too long. "Remove everything from the waist down and lie down, if you will."

Mary Eunice took her purse and her coat from her, expression solemn; Lana felt Mary Eunice's gaze return to her face every few seconds, gauging her emotions, adjusting her reaction. Mary Eunice was reading her like a newspaper. Does she know that I would rather walk across hot coals than lie down on that ugly futon? Undressing in front of the prying eyes sent her insides smoldering, and the instant that thought teased her mind, Mary Eunice turned away, sensing her discomfort. She slipped out of her shoes, unbuttoned her pants and slid them down, and then her panties dropped into the heap. The newspapers crinkled when she sat on them and took off her socks.

"Miss, you can sit over there." The doctor nodded to a straight—backed wooden chair. "Move it nearer if you like."

As Lana lay back on the futon, her heart leapt about in her chest, plummeting to her stomach and flopping back up to her throat. Sweat slipped around her thighs and in her armpits. She could see the ceiling, nothing else, but she heard the thump as Mary Eunice moved the chair beside her. "I'm right here," she promised, voice low, and Lana turned her head so she could see the familiar face. Mary Eunice smiled at her, a nervous reassurance. I've never been half-naked in front of a nun before. Another thing off the bucket list.

Metal rattled at the base of the futon, and she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from reflexively jerking her legs together and refusing to open them. "Open your legs wider, please, Miss Summers."

She hiked them up as requested, the same position she would have given to receive oral sex. But her nether regions had never been so dry, so lacking arousal. A tool entered her vagina, the frigid metal piercing through her soft flesh. Mary Eunice's eyes hadn't left her face. It pressed deeper, deeper into her; the chill shuddered through the rest of her body at the pressure it placed on her sensitive insides. Above her, Bloody Face hazed, his face clear and twisted in ecstasy, hairy chest bare and dripping sweat upon her.

Mary Eunice took her hand, and she twisted out of the memory with a gasp. "Jane, I really must ask you not to make any more noise. We mustn't attract any attention to ourselves." The doctor's chiding voice was gentle but stern.

"I—I understand—" Mary Eunice's fingertips had moved to the pulse point on Lana's wrist, and she shivered at the touch, both welcome and unwelcome at the same time.

"Squeeze my hand," Mary Eunice encouraged. She warmed Lana's hand between both of hers, cradled it like a cherished memento or a wounded bird in her palm. Lana fixed herself upon Mary Eunice, the curve of her lips, the slight upward tilt of her nose, the thickness of her eyebrows, the
intense blue of her eyes.

Something prodded inside her body, farther inside than she had ever expected to feel anything, and a thin trickle started from between her legs, running into a slick puddle beneath her thighs. She clamped her lips together to stifle the whimper budding in her throat. Mary Eunice rubbed the back of her hand, and her eyelids fluttered closed while she fought for some peace of mind, for focus on something other than the foreign movement inside her.

Bloody Face needed no prompting to rear his ugly head again, this time handsome and coy in his glasses while he poured himself a drink; she kept the gun trained at him, and then his head exploded, and Did I do that? ran through her head so many times that it echoed. Her hand clenched tightly, fingers tangling with Mary Eunice's as she attempted to measure her breathing. The scraping of the metal inside her body sent goosebumps all over her arms and legs and neck. Those were Bloody Face's fingers tracing from her ankle, up her calf, circling her knee, trailing her inner thigh, higher still—

Lana jerked so hard that she quite nearly bounced right off of the futon, crying out. The tool slipped inside her body, and something popped in a way that she knew it wasn't supposed to pop. "Miss Summers!" The doctor's hiss would have been a shout in a different setting where they had freedom to speak without fear of discovery. "If you cannot control yourself, you'll have to find a different doctor. I won't have you injured at my expense." The blood flowed out of her now, more freely than it ever had during menstruation; the newspaper could not possibly catch all of it.

Mary Eunice put an arm over her quivering shoulders. "She was raped," she snapped, face set in dark judgment. Her body had all of the warmth that the doctor had stolen from Lana; Lana didn't want to let her go. "Lying down with her legs spread in front a stranger isn't exactly a stroll in the park."

"Christine," Lana whispered, shocked at the sudden insubordination from her usually complacent friend. Her eyelashes fluttered as she struggled to ground herself in reality, far away from Bloody Face's hands on her legs. "I'm fine." Sweat ran down her temple in a trickle. "I'm fine." She repeated it, uncertain if she wanted to convince herself, the doctor, or Mary Eunice, who held her with such concern that she wondered if she could ever convince her friend that she was whole once again.

"If we could continue, then."

Lana lay back on the futon again. Nausea throbbed through her, and her head spun around, but Mary Eunice hovered so near that her smell wreathed around Lana in comfort. The hand pressed to her forehead, smoothed her hair out of her eyes. The round face had a halo of gold around it. She looks like an angel. A very concerned, somewhat pissed off angel. Each time Mary Eunice touched her, she became more numb below the waist.

When the doctor invited her to sit up, Mary Eunice supported her, and her bare ass squelched in the puddle of blood and tissue that they had created, similar to the one that Lana had seen when she attempted to self-abort at Briarcliff. But this time, it felt real—it had to be real.

She had brought her own menstruation belt, anticipating the mess, and when Mary Eunice returned her purse to her, she pulled it out with shaking hands. The doctor provided her a couple of pads. "You'll want to change them fairly often. Try to rest while you're at home. Drink plenty of water." To Mary Eunice, she said, "Don't leave her alone."

"I won't." Mary Eunice's hands had also gained a tremble, and her face lost the convicted look that she had held through the procedure, now meek once again as she looked to Lana for guidance. She worried her own hands while Lana redressed herself until, frustrated by her own helplessness,
she crossed her arms, burying her hands where they could not fidget.

Lana watched her out of the corner of her eye. *She only has a certain amount of courage. She used it with me.* Her abdomen cramped, and her face rolled up as she buttoned her pants and replaced her shoes and socks. Everything felt wet and sticky and warm, more than it ever had on her period, and her pubic hair had tangled into painful, tugging mats. Running her tongue over her dry lips, she passed the doctor a single one hundred dollar bill; she had only held so much money a couple times before in her life, but when it left her hand, the weight lifted from her shoulders, leaving her belly light and flipping. "Let's go, Christine."

Mary Eunice flanked her, placing a hand on the small of her back, and the pressure there granted Lana relief so wholesome that she nearly crumbled on the spot. The door clicked closed behind them. With a grimace, she placed a hand over her lower abdomen from where the sharp pain emanated—where she had felt something *pop* inside of her. Mary Eunice's lips fluttered, but Lana dissuaded, "Not here."

She had intentionally parked far away upon arrival, hoping that no one would connect her car to the illegal abortion doctor a block away, but the distance caused a fire to burble inside her. Mary Eunice didn't challenge her, but she remained near; once they made it out into the rain, she opened the umbrella and kept Lana beneath its shelter. "Can you drive?" The question left her lips before she considered the words, but she did not regret them. The cramping sent her face into crumples of resistance, her hands balling into fists, and she did not trust herself to drive safely with the licks of pain running through her body.

"I'm not licensed."

"Just go slow." Mary Eunice opened the car door for her. *What a gentleman.* She waited for several cars to pass by before she rounded the corner and sat in the driver's seat. Lana leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes, measuring her breaths, before she looked at Mary Eunice.

Mary Eunice gazed back at her, hands twitching with uncertainty. "Are you okay?" Her low voice croaked over the words, and with the question, the genuine caring attached to them, a lump surged to Lana's throat so thick that she couldn't swallow it. "Lana?" She folded at the middle with weary tears falling where she could hold them back no longer.

The patter of the morose weather upon the windshield muffled the sound of her sobs when Mary Eunice swept her into her arms and clutched her close. The tears soaked like raindrops into Mary Eunice's sweater; it still had Wendy's perfume somewhere deep in the fabric, like a memory waiting to be recalled. Lana buried her face into her chest and let the warm arms comfort her. Each whimper quieted to ride in on a new, broken proclamation once more. Single droplets fell from above into her hair, and when she lifted her eyes to Mary Eunice, the pink streaks had discolored her face where she had begun to cry, as well.

"Are you okay?" she asked again, both watery eyes fixed on Lana.

Lana nodded, slow, measuring her own hesitance. "I feel so—relieved." Her eyelids fluttered against the headache blossoming behind her eyes from crying too hard. She rested there in the arms of safety, listening to the thrum of a heartbeat. "Thank you," she whispered, "for coming with me."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." A shiver tingled through Mary Eunice's body in a quake, and another tear slid down her cheek. "That place was really scary."

A wry, weak smile touched Lana's face. "You didn't seem to have a problem telling that doctor to stick her business up her ass—I'm paraphrasing, of course."
Blush tickling her cheeks, Mary Eunice admitted, "I'm not sure where that came from. I didn't mean to snarl at her, I was just so scared she was hurting you—and she wasn't being incredibly sympathetic—and I'm sorry." She touched the back of Lana's hand.

"No, it was, you were—I'm glad you were there." Lana blinked a few times. The space behind her eyes had grown bleary, thoughts thickening like caramel as she fought to keep them coherent, her sentences in order. Her heavy eyelids fell, but the smell of Mary Eunice reminded her of her own safety. "Can we go home now?"

"Of course." Mary Eunice's driving skills were lackluster at best, and she cranked the car. She had to search for the windshield wipers and the headlights and the gearshift, and as she pushed down on the clutch and the car bubbled underneath them, she wondered if a decade of remaining off-road had stolen her abilities. But Lana lazed beside her, exhausted emotionally and physically, and Mary Eunice knew she couldn't go back on her word now.

The roads were mostly void of traffic, everyone at work or school, everyone else safe in their homes, out of the wet and cold weather. The buildings hummed by with uneasy jerks of Mary Eunice's feet, all tangled up in one another. She took several wrong turns and had to explore the blocks before she found a familiar street name and followed it back to Lana's house. She parked crookedly in the driveway. Lana drowsed in the seat; a dark, wet mark discolored the crotch of her pants. Already? Mary Eunice licked her lips. Surely she wasn't supposed to bleed that heavily? Oh, what do I know?

Clambering out of the car, she walked around to the passenger's side in the steady rain and opened the door. "Lana," she prompted. Brown eyes rolled over to her, and Lana straightened in her seat, sliding out quietly and standing. Her grimace deepened, and she folded at the middle. Mary Eunice reached to steady her. "I've got you," she assured. Lana straightened, focusing; a shadow crossed her face as they climbed the front steps and entered the house. "Do you want to lie down?"

"I'm fine." Lana kept blinking too quickly, expression readjusting, like she fought for her mind. That wasn't what I asked. Mary Eunice relinquished her hold on Lana, but she scanned her carefully, waiting to aid her if she showed a sign of faltering.

"What do you want to eat?"

"I'm not hungry."

"You haven't eaten anything yet today. It's lunchtime," Mary Eunice probed, a frown pursing her lips. Lana had a pale, drawn look, and she staggered down the hall, toward the bedroom; Mary Eunice followed her like a shadow and saw that Lana curled up in the bed. "I'll get you a glass of water." She tugged the covers up around Lana and pressed a hand to her forehead, but she wasn't too warm. "Will you eat some crackers if I bring them to you?"

Voice thickening into a slur, Lana repeated, "'M not hungry." She yawned, drawn up into a little ball, hands resting her abdomen. "'M tired."

Mary Eunice resisted the drive to smooth her hair back out of her eyes and linger at her bedside with worry. Worrying wouldn't make Lana better. "Okay. I'll let you rest." Her own stomach quelled with hunger. "If you need me, call, please." Lana grunted vaguely in return.

She brought a glass of water to the bedside and left it there; Lana didn't stir to sip from it. Then, she knelt at the bed and prayed her rosary, and she did it again, and then she did it once more, for good measure. Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. The sacred words tingled inside her. Never before had she chosen another person over her faith—and it frightened her, what
she had done for Lana. But her fear did not trump the single conviction she maintained: she had
done the right thing, and she would do it again as long as Lana was her friend. I pray that I have
made the right choice to best serve in good faith. Please grant Lana safety and health and guide
her to joy. She has done so much for me. She deserves so much more.

By the time she finished praying, she was dizzy with hunger, and she stood on her numb legs and
got to make two sandwiches. The one that she made for Lana went on the end table beside the
untouched glass of water; Lana had fallen asleep, twitching and mumbling under her breath. Mary
Eunice did not disturb her until she roused nearly an hour later. She rolled out of the bed to go to
the bathroom. She left a red mark in her wake, a stamp on the sheets. Only a moment after the
bathroom door closed, Lana's strained voice called out, "Sister? Could you—Could you get me
another pair of underwear, and—and pants?"

Mary Eunice fetched both of those things from her drawers and knocked twice on the door before
she entered. "Thanks." Lana was still pale, sweaty, hair matted from the time spent in bed. The
pad she rolled between her fingers was so thick with red-brown blood and chunks of tissue that
Mary Eunice winced, turning away to hide her expression; she wet a rag to busy her hands. "Jesus
Christ, this isn't very pretty. I feel like shit." She clothed herself while Mary Eunice had her back
turned, flushing with embarrassment and shaking all over. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not disturbed," Mary Eunice replied; she gave the warm rag to Lana, who mopped up her
gray face. "I've seen worse." She had the compassion to delicately handle the messes that sent
Sister Jude into a rage—and she had learned that it always ended better for her if she cleaned those
things before Sister Jude found out. "You should take some Tylenol. I made you a sandwich, but I
can make something else if you want."

As Lana stood, she clutched the edge of the counter for support, closing her eyes to fight the
dizziness. Mary Eunice touched her elbow. "I—I'm fine." She swallowed hard. "I'm not hungry.
My stomach hurts." Reaching into the cabinet for Tylenol, she gulped down a couple pills. "I
think I need to lie down for awhile longer."

*It's four PM, Mary Eunice despaired internally, and you haven't eaten all day.* She bit back the
words and nodded, allowing Lana to return the bed, steps swaying. Lana curled up in the covers.
Mary Eunice put the soiled clothing in the hamper and returned to her side, sitting beside her in the
bed. Lana buckled at the middle, both of her hands resting on her lower abdomen, face all
screwed up and white. Mary Eunice wiped her face with the wet washcloth. "This isn't right," she
murmured.

"I'm fine!" Lana fumed the words, but she shivered from head to toe, and a fearful shadow
crossed her face. Mary Eunice pulled the covers around her shoulders. "You don't have to wait on
me. You're not my maid."

"I know. But I'm your friend. I want to make sure you're well." Lana quieted; she gave Mary
Eunice a baleful look, but the pain softened it. *She's in pain and doesn't want to admit it.* "Do you
want another blanket?"

"I'll just bleed on it," Lana denied, a bitter lacing to her tone. Burrowed under the blankets, she
looked like a turtle, half-tucked in its shell, but both of her eyes fixed on Mary Eunice. This was
the most childlike version of Lana that Mary Eunice had seen, her most vulnerable form. "I'm
sorry," Lana apologized again. "I don't mean to snap." Mary Eunice reassured her with a smile.
"Sister? Can I ask you a personal question?"

Her heartbeat quickened. A personal question? An invasion of her memories once again? She
could not afford to dive into her past now, to see through the demon's eyes; she needed her wits
about her while she was caring for Lana. "Of course. I don't have anything to keep from you."
"What—What are you going to do, if it happens that you're pregnant?"

The question startled Mary Eunice. She hadn't expected the conversation to turn to her, but Lana's uncertain face almost looked like she wanted reassurance. "I suppose I won't have a choice but to revoke my vows and find—find something to do." Her pulse increased, palms sweating. Leaving the church, the only safety she had ever found in this cruel world, sent her belly into flips, and her eyes filled with tears. You lost your virtue. You should revoke your vows. You are unworthy. That hateful voice resurfaced in her mind, and she fought to stifle it.

Lana's sweaty hand reached for one of Mary Eunice's and rested on top of it; Lana's skin was cool to the touch. "Would you keep the baby, or would you give it away?"

Frowning, Mary Eunice considered. "I—I don't know." She rolled her hand beneath Lana's so that they were palm to palm. "I could not provide adequately—I don't have any marketable skills—" Shaking her head, she murmured, "I know what it's like to be raised without a father. I wouldn't want to do that to any child." A long pause followed as she considered, and she continued, "But it would be hard for me to give away my own flesh and blood. I also know what it's like to be unwanted. I wouldn't want my baby to feel that way." Mary Eunice wiped her cheeks with her other hand, infuriated that she had begun to cry again.

Their fingers curled together as Lana squeezed her hand. "You have a place with me," she mumbled, voice thick. "As long as you want it. Both of you, if that's the case." Her lips turned downward a little, and she continued, "We could make my office into a nursery."

"Oh, Lana—" Mary Eunice pinched the bridge of her nose. "You're so good to me. I—I don't know what I would do if I didn't have you." She rubbed the back of Lana's hand with her thumb. "I don't want to have to make that choice," she whispered. A watery smile shivered upon her lips. "I've prayed that the Lord will take this cup from me. Does that make me selfish?"

Lana's face contorted into a grimace of pain, and Mary Eunice smoothed the washcloth over her sweaty skin again. "You are the least selfish person I know," Lana croaked. When she released the tight breath she held, her body quivered. "Sister, did I—" She closed her eyes, expression taut. "Did I do the right thing?"

"I'm not sure I'm qualified to answer that," Mary Eunice murmured, smoothing Lana's hair out of her eyes. "I prayed for the strength to support you faithfully, and God granted me that. I think that must mean He isn't entirely disapproving."

A quick breath snorted from Lana's nostrils. "While I'm certain that God's opinion is very important in the grand scheme of things," she mumbled, words tangling up together, "I wanna know what you think."

"Oh." Mary Eunice cursed the part of her which naturally provided spiritual counsel. How long had it been since someone had genuinely considered her opinion on something? Once, probably over a year ago, Dr. Arden had asked what she thought about two different ties; this scenario differed so much that she hardly found it applicable. "I think that you did what was best for you. And I think that you already know that."

Lana hummed; her eyes looked vaguely beyond Mary Eunice, unfocused. "Wendy wouldn't have gone with me. She would have been afraid of being seen." As she sucked in a deep breath, her chest quivered. "I miss her so much."

"I know, Lana. I'm sorry." I would cut off my own legs to give her to you. I pray that you find peace every night before I sleep beside you. If I had never let you into Briarcliff, you would never
have lost her, and that is my burden to bear. But Lana's eyes had begun to drowse close, so Mary Eunice held her tongue. "Try to rest. I'll stay here if you need something."

After offering a murmur of thanks, Lana stilled, but the peace didn't sustain; Lana rose on three times, almost on the hour, each time needing a change of clothes. The last time, Mary Eunice gathered up the dirty clothes. They had managed to create more laundry in one day than they typically did in three, and she put them to wash in cold water, hoping that nothing would be stained irreparably.

The floor echoed in a loud thump, and Mary Eunice flinched so hard that she dropped the detergent. "Lana?" She jogged from the washing machine back to the bedroom, where Lana had fallen in the floor. "Lana!" With gentle hands, she lifted her upward. "This isn't right," she tutted. Lana's limbs wracked so forcefully that she couldn't hold steady; she was cool to the touch. "We need to go to the hospital. You're losing too much blood."

"I'm fine!" Lana's eyelids fluttered. "I'm just a little dizzy." You passed out, Mary Eunice wanted to wail. "I'll be better tomorrow." With Mary Eunice's aid, she crawled back into bed. "Come here—you haven't slept—" The words blended together. Mary Eunice had to pick them apart. "You need to rest." One of Lana's shaking hands plucked her by the front of her shirt, tugged her into the bed.

"Lana, please…"

"Sh, it's okay. It's not okay. Mary Eunice wanted to beg Lana to reconsider, but those hands remained fixed to her clothing, and she didn't have the heart to pull away. "I'm gonna be alright." Lana shivered all over. "I just need someone to warm me up." Her glossy eyes held Mary Eunice's until they lay together in bed.

Lana nestled close to Mary Eunice. "You're so cold," Mary Eunice whispered. She pressed a hand to Lana's forehead, wiped the clammy sweat from her. "Lana—"

"Sleep," Lana grunted. Obedient, Mary Eunice quieted. "I'll feel better tomorrow." Mary Eunice fought it, but after the lamp light died, the darkness lured her. While she struggled against unconsciousness, it sucked her in, consumed her before she could finish her last prayer of the night. Lord, please look after Lana while she sleeps.

A dark dream discolored Mary Eunice's thoughts, the sweltering flavor of blood upon her lips, all rusty and thick. She squirmed in the blackness, and as she pushed back from a rearing monster with glowing red eyes, she landed in quicksand. Those horrible scarlet eyes gleamed down upon her, yellow teeth having a rancid stench laced with the breath. Her cold face tingled with the heat of it. When she opened her mouth, her voice refused to answer her call, gaping open as something wormed its way through her gut, pushing against her stomach from the inside. Her abdomen seized into a series of cramps. She floundered with her hands amok, the drive to escape trumping all of her other needs.

Her hand landed in something wet and slick, and she surged upward from her dream, stripping the covers off of her body. Thunder clapped outside, lightning casting the room in white before the darkness dominated again. I fell asleep! Heartbeat driven into an upbeat pulse, her voice came too thin. "Lana?" She rolled over and flipped on the lamp.

Lana lay on her back, skin bleach white, while the ruddy, wet patch beneath her in the bed had expanded, soaking through layers of blankets and sheets. "No—no, no, no, Lana!" Mary Eunice seized her by the shoulders and shook her. "Lana, wake up, please!" Her eyes welled up. "No, Lana—" Please don't take her away from me, she begged. Oh, take me instead! "Lana—" She grappled for Lana's wrist and sought a pulse.
It fluttered there, rapid and weak beneath the skin, and as if on command, Lana turned her head and groaned, low and pained. "Sis…" Her brown eyes rolled up, focusing and crossing, as she fought for awareness. Her whole body exhaled sweat, and she shivered. "Cold—"

Mary Eunice shushed her. "It's okay, it's okay," she wept. She scooped one arm around Lana. "Hold on, hold onto me. Lana, hold onto me." Her other arm slid underneath her, all sticky in the mess that had accumulated since they fell asleep.

"Don't—hurt yourself." Lana lolled back against her chest, closing her eyes.

"Don't worry about me." With one of Lana's arms loosely flopping around her neck, she considered the grip the best she would get and staggered to her feet. The heavy weight made her suck in a deep breath and stumble through the house. As she bumped into the wall, Lana grunted. "I'm sorry!" She landed heavily in the office chair, and Mary Eunice's whole body shook from exertion as she dialed the operator. "I need an ambulance, please, right away—Lana, what's the address? I need the address."

She clutched Lana's hand tightly. Lana blinked, eyes all bleary, and she mumbled, "Can't. Get arrested." Her face screwed up in a white haze, and she retreated, curling up as best she could in the chair. "Hurts…"

Tears slid down Mary Eunice's cheeks in hearty streams. "Lana, please, give me the address." She put down the phone, ignoring the operator repeating something in her ear. "I won't let them arrest you, I promise, just please tell me the address—" Won't let them? she questioned herself. How will you stop them? She wasn't certain. "I can't sit here and watch you die!" Her voice cracked into a broken sob. When Lana didn't respond, she flung back from the table. "I'm going to the mailbox—the house number is on the mailbox—"

A weak hand caught on her sleeve. "Don't leave." Lana's crooked whisper drew Mary Eunice closer, struggling to discern the slur. "Catchyer death out there. Ih's—580 Cornwell." She wrapped her hand around Mary Eunice's thumb; she lacked the coordination to hold her hand the way that she wanted.

Mary Eunice reported the address into the phone, allowing Lana to toy with her hand. Gradually, Lana stilled, head falling backward as she slipped out of consciousness again. "Ma'am, what is the nature of your emergency?"

I've got to wake her up. "My friend, she's pregnant, she's bleeding everywhere, she keeps passing out—please, there's so much blood—she's white as a sheet—she needs help." The lie twisted its way in with all of the truths so that she hardly considered it.

"I'll send someone."

Mary Eunice disconnected the line before the operator continued, diving back to Lana. "Wake up, wake up." The brown eyes drifted up to her with great leisure. "Hold on." The first time she lifted Lana, it had nearly crippled her, and now her muscles quivered, already spent from the first herculean task. Her vision gained black blots as she lowered Lana onto the couch. "Flat—flat on your back, legs elevated—" Why didn't I learn anything useful at Briarcliff? she wailed internally. "Help is coming—Lana, stay awake, look at me. Don't go to sleep."

Fingers flitted over her hand like feathers. "M so cold. Hurts." Oh, I'm so sorry. Mary Eunice tried to rub warmth into Lana's hand. Her tears fell too fast for her to struggle through a soothing answer. Lana curled her fingers. "Sister?" Her glossy eyes narrowed into slits, fixed upon Mary Eunice's face, clinging to it. "Will you…" She sighed heavily; the effort of speaking exhausted her. "Will you sing a song?"
Her lips trembled so hard she almost couldn't reply, and a stammer punctuated her words. "W— What do you want me to sing?" In a fell swoop, every song she had ever known vacated her mind. Lana grunted vaguely in reply, fingers bending in Mary Eunice's hand. Her heart raced into her jawline and drummed, vibrant beneath the skin, mocking the weakness of Lana's pulse. As her voice oscillated, cracking with tears, she brushed Lana's hair out of her eyes. "Fog's rollin' in off the East River Bank." The words held no tune, rhythm perverted by her distress. "Like a shroud, it covers Bleecker Street. Fills the alleys where men sleep, hides the shepherd from the sheep."

She pinched her eyes closed so that the tears would fall, would cease their burning in her eyes. When she opened them again, she dabbed away the single tear that had budded in the corner of Lana's eye. "Voices—leaking, from a sad cafe." She sniffled hard. "Smiling faces try to understand—I saw a shadow—" Mary Eunice choked and tightened her grip upon Lana. "I saw a shadow touch a shadow's hand. On Bleecker Street." She gasped for air, snot running out of her nose, and she caught it on her sleeve.

"I feel like a shadow," Lana sighed, so faint. Mary Eunice leaned forward over her, hoping to shake the weakness from her and wrap her up and feed her strength, but red and blue lights flashed through the window. "Don't—leave—" Lana's sweaty hand fought Mary Eunice's, reluctant to let her disentangle their fingers. Each tear creasing Lana's cheeks sent Mary Eunice spiraling into despair.

"I have to let them in," she soothed. "I'll stay with you, I promise." Tearing herself away enraged the wound on her soul, and as she ripped open the door to usher in the uniformed men with a stretcher. As they surrounded Lana, Mary Eunice buried her face in her hands to stifle a loud sob, unable to watch them lift her. God, please, please, heal her. I am so powerless. Please don't let her die now.

A wail, all weak and puny, rose from Lana's lungs. "Sister—" she choked out; her limbs battered in terror against all of the unfamiliar faces. Mary Eunice scrambled to her side once again, straining for her hand, which was just out of reach. One of the men allowed her to climb, barefoot and clad in bloodstained pajamas, into the back of the ambulance; they scuffled and debated, but no one hurled her out.

She didn't know the answers to any of their questions, only Lana's name. "I'm here," she promised, cradling Lana's hand in her own now that she could reach it. "We're going to the hospital now. You're going to be okay." But Lana's grip slackened; her limbs battered for focus on her face. "Squeeze my hand," she encouraged. She swiped the tears from her face with her sleeve. "Lana, can you hear me?" Please, please, we're so close. A man pushed her back to reach Lana better, and she tucked up, making herself as small as possible. Give her the strength to pull through, please. I don't want to live without her.

For Lana, the night passed in a heavy haze. She had a pleasant dream, floating along, naked but warm in the sunshine. Mary Eunice seized her from that precious delirium, and when she surged into wakefulness, her body ached of bitter cold and a belly in tangles. Her tongue stiffened against all of her thoughts, all of the things she wanted to ask Mary Eunice. Why is it so cold? Why does it hurt? Mary Eunice's words echoed, and she had to strain to puzzle through them, like learning a second language.

The tangled puzzle that Mary Eunice constructed with her lips made Lana keep her hand clasped close. She knew Mary Eunice had moved her—How did she do that? She'll hurt herself. And the cold had worsened here; there were no blankets. Won't you hold me? You make it feel better. But the snippets she made out of her friend's face, reddened and inconsolable, gave her no comfort. Don't cry, Lana dissuaded, but her fat tongue thickened and stuck somewhere in her mouth where it would not detach. What's the matter? Does it hurt you, too? Lana didn't know if
she had any tears left. Her whole body was crying, weeping chilly sweat, sticking her hair to her face so that she couldn't see past it. *It should only hurt me.*

*A m I dying?* Lana considered the prospect of it, dying. This life hurt her. But she didn't feel dead. She felt pained, torn, and she wanted Mary Eunice closer to her. *I don't want to die.* "Will you sing a song?" Her voice had lost all of its consistency as she scraped about for the correct collection of her thoughts. She had never heard Mary Eunice sing. *Sister Jude probably thinks that it's obscene.*

But in her low, croaking voice, shaking with terror that Lana wished she could soothe away, Mary Eunice plucked through the first verse of a Simon and Garfunkel song. Lana had to struggle to grasp the words, fighting the sucking darkness at the back of her mind. *I think we're both shadows.* The thought made her clutch Mary Eunice's hand tighter. *I don't want to lose her.*

As she thought it, Mary Eunice ripped away from her, and men encroached upon her, all of them smellly with impassive faces—she could not make out their fine features, and each one of them transformed into Bloody Face in her imagination. *No!* She struggled, but she could not control her arms and legs, too weak to lift them and batter these strangers away. *Mary Eunice, where did you go?* She cried out, but she didn't know if her voice made it to the air; she could not hear herself over the scuffles of all the hands on her body, hoisting her above the earth.

Mary Eunice's face appeared again. "I'm here." The words calmed Lana's stomach. The men, their movements and questions, did not matter. *I don't think anything matters.* Numbness spread up from her toes. The frigid chill, like someone had dropped her in a snowbank and left her, ate down to her very bones. Mary Eunice's pink mouth formed more words, but Lana's attention moved to the familiar figure beside her, elderly and kind, clad in black from head to toe. "You called for me. Are you ready?" She drew nearer; she smelled like lilacs. "Not so long has passed since I last saw you." Lana's eyes drew upward, to the white silhouette of Mary Eunice, pixelated and distant. *Why did she stop holding my hand?* "She can't see me, Lana. I appear only to the one who summons me."

Lana's dry lips pursed. "I..." Her voice scraped about in her throat. "I don't want to leave her." Mary Eunice was speaking again, now, having heard her voice, but Lana did not listen to the words. "What will happen to her if I go?"

"I do not know." Shachath gazed at Mary Eunice's profile. "I cannot read the future. I deliver souls. And I can deliver yours, if you're prepared."

Lazy blinks followed, considering. "It hurts." There was a fire in her loins, a numbness everywhere else, and memories danced before her, things she didn't want to see—Bloody Face, his body and chest, his glasses, the taste of his sweat and stench of his manhood—and she gulped at the air for some freedom, but everything tasted stale and chalky.

But as the Shachath leaned over her, fresher things rolled before her eyes. Making love for the first time, her body writhing beneath Wendy's—dancing on her nineteenth birthday party to Ella Fitzgerald—moving into their new house. Then Wendy's face changed, round with blue eyes and soft, golden hair, and Lana saw memories of Mary Eunice, stifling the flames in the kitchen, braiding her hair, cuddling so close she could taste her breath, dancing to a folk song and burying her grief, releasing her emotion into the chest of a caring friend. Among those memories mingled her fantasies—a pale body coiled beneath her own, nude and pure—lips upon hers, the taste of strawberries and rain—the smooth texture of flaxen hair as she raked her hands through it. *Wishful thinking, Lana mused, or things yet to come?* Those things could never be, and she knew it. How strongly they influenced her answer, she
wasn't sure. "I can't go with you. I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to apologize for, my dear." Shachath took a step back. "Until we meet again."

"Lana?" Mary Eunice's voice cut through her madness alongside the agony in her lower gut, ripping through like a blade. "Lana, what did you say? I don't understand."

Eyes fought for focus. *I want to see her face.* She found it, all blurry and indistinct, but still angelic in the light surrounding it. "I love you," she whispered. Her tongue had the taffy-like feeling again. She hoped Mary Eunice understood. *You are the reason I am still here.*

"I love you, too, Lana."

As the ambulance drew to a halt, Lana stole one last glance at Mary Eunice. *My best friend.* How someone could adopt that label so quickly, she wasn't certain, but when the men stripped them apart and Lana found unconsciousness finally sucking her in, she succumbed with the last wondering of, *I hope she's okay.*
Chapter Notes

Chapter title: 2 Kings 2:2

The waiting room of the hospital held no comfort for Mary Eunice, all bright and sterile like she had opened her eyes from possession once more and lay, stripped bare and feverish, in front of unfamiliar faces. A candy striper had brought her a pair of socks and slippers, offered her some coffee or water. Mary Eunice shook her head, mumbling a word of thanks. The numbness had paralyzed her measure of politeness, and once the young woman left, she wrapped her rosary around her hand and prayed. She hadn't stopped praying since she awoke and found Lana, but each fervent reach for faith sent pangs echoing through her empty spiritual walls, a reverberated voice whose source she sought but could not find.

This is all my fault. How many times she thought it, she didn't know, but each time, it stabbed her in the gut once again. I shouldn't have listened to her. I knew there was something wrong. Folding at the middle, she pressed her tongue to hurry faster across the rosary, a race against the clock, and once she finished the prayer, she clutched the crucifix and began again. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth..." The lull of the words chased away the more destructive thoughts. It was not the sacrilege that comforted her. It was the routine and rhythm; like a hairbrush, the familiarity worked through her tangles and allowed her to lie flat once again.

The hours ticked by like years. When she lifted her head from her prayer, having repeated it so many times that the words no longer sounded like words, morning light had begun to stream through the window. She stood unsteadily; her legs folded like rubber beneath her as she approached the desk. "Miss?" Clearing her throat, she ducked her head in embarrassment to the nurse. "What—What time is it?"

"It's almost nine o'clock, darling." The nurse had a sweet southern lilt to her voice. "You doin' alright, honey? You been sitting a long while."

"I'm fine," Mary Eunice replied, faint, thoughts wandering back to Lana. Where is she? she wanted to demand. Is she okay? "Have you heard from Lana Winters yet?" Hesitance grappled with her guts and swished inside her empty stomach.

"No one has told me anything yet, ma'am, but when I know something, you'll know something." The nurse flashed her a smile. "You don't need to worry. She's in great hands, I promise. She should be just fine."

Mary Eunice excused herself to slip off to the bathroom; her haggard reflection stared back at her, hair in tangles, face blotched with ruddy patches, eyes bloodshot and lips pale. She washed her face with cold water and attempted to straighten her hair, but even that could not remove the brown spatters of blood on her clothes; she scrubbed her hands, but the remnants still collected under her fingernails. Lana will be okay. Her breath hitched in her chest, and she scratched at her own hands more vigorously, leaving red streaks upon her irritated white skin. She has to be okay. There's no reason she wouldn't be. Her belly hiccuped at the thought of entering a room, Lana there, awake, well, smiling. She will be fine.

The last she had seen of Lana tingled in her mind, stretched long and white, eyes misted over as
she spoke nonsensical mumbles to an invisible figure. But then she had come back, regarded Mary Eunice with clarity as she said, "I love you."

No one had loved Mary Eunice in a very long time. She had filled her craving for affection by shrouding herself in God's holy light; what did it matter if she had no family or friends if God loved her? God's love would never peter out; He would never leave her. With God, she was safe. But she had forgotten what it felt like to have another human's love, to feel important and cherished. Lana was Mary Eunice's first friend. And you almost lost her.

When she left the bathroom, the slippers muffled her footsteps upon the cool tile floor, and she returned to the seat that she had previously occupied. She reached for her rosary, but the door to leading to the back of the hospital swung open, and she straightened as a doctor emerged, both dark eyes fixed upon her. "Are you here for Miss Winters?" She stood and nodded, expression deepening to reflect his solemnness. But his face relaxed into a tired half-smile. "You must be her sister. She was asking for you."

"Actually, I'm—" Shut up shut up shut up! she chided herself, and she pressed her lips together, agreeing with him in a series of quick nods. "Is she okay?"

He didn't catch her mistake. "She's going to be fine," he assured. "We gave her a blood transfusion, and I had to repair a perforation on her uterus." A shadow crossed his face. He knows. Mary Eunice bit her lip, scrambling for some response, some explanation, or a lie that would justify Lana's symptoms. But then it passed. "We have her on morphine and some strong antibiotics. She woke up after surgery, but she's resting now."

"Can I see her?" The doctor gestured with an open arm, an invitation, and Mary Eunice jogged after him to keep up. "Doctor—when can she go home?"

He inclined his eyebrows. "We will keep her tonight for observation. If she continues to improve, she can go home tomorrow afternoon." He guided her to a door labeled 111. "The nurse call button is beside the bed if you need something."

She thanked him and reached for the door handle, disturbed by the coldness of it, and alone, she entered the room. Lana was on a small bed in the corner of the room, hooked to a heart monitor and an IV. All white and tiny, Mary Eunice tiptoed near to her, afraid that she would wake her if she breathed too loudly. But Lana had goosebumps on her exposed arms, so the caregiver within took over, unfolding the blanket from the foot of the bed and draping it over her friend. Her chest rose and fell steadily.

*She looks so peaceful.* Mary Eunice sank into the chair beside the bed and reached, hesitant, to touch the back of Lana's hand. "It's okay now." Whether she spoke to comfort herself or Lana, she wasn't certain. Then she reached into her pocket, retrieving her rosary once more. She held it between their hands. "Thank you." Lifting her eyes to the cross on the wall, she studied the fixture. "She is all I have left." As she cradled Lana's limp, white hand, her lips trembled. "Please strengthen her and bring her health and joy. That's all I ask for her." With her thumb, she circled the back of Lana's hand, feeling all of the bones and veins there, under the surface of the thin skin.

Lana floated somewhere gray and warm where she curled into another woman's soft body, the scent of perfume clinging to the places where their flesh touched. The other body faded, replaced by a chill, until she felt the caress of someone at her hand. Mary Eunice's dark voice whispered onward, and Lana wanted to speak to her, but her dry lips were sealed closed. She's praying. *Don't interrupt.* In spite of herself, she listened closely. *She's praying about me.*

The notion would have caused her to smile and reflect fondly on Mary Eunice's innocence, but a sharp pain stabbed through her lower abdomen. Her face screwed up, hand reflexively tightening
No," she croaked. She wrapped her fingers around two of Mary Eunice's and squeezed, refusing to relinquish them. "No drugs." With her other hand, she reached to touch her stomach, but the cords caught her. She grunted in protest. What happened? Her tongue didn't want to cooperate with her. Neither did her eyes, still closed like weights rested upon them.

"You don't have to torment yourself," Mary Eunice whispered. The cool caress of her hand granted Lana some solace. "You don't have to endure it all…"

"Pain is temporary," Lana mumbled. "Addiction is forever." But this pain felt like the devil himself had stuffed hot coals from hell inside her vagina, and all of her insides boiled from the heat. She fought to measure her breaths. "Don't." Mary Eunice's silence meant she was thinking about it, and Lana didn't want her to think about it.

"That's what you said last night, before you almost died." The fingers probed the inside of her wrist, massaged there. Lana directed her focus to that place on her body, the rosary pressed against her skin. "I'm not sure that you have your own best interests at heart." Oh, shut up, Lana wanted to say. Get out of here. Instead, she grunted, too tired and sore to demonstrate her infuriation. But Mary Eunice did not press the matter further. "Do you want some water?"

"Mhm." She listened to Mary Eunice call the nurse, heard someone come in the room, and then Mary Eunice held a straw to her lips. The water tasted clean and crisp and settled her insides with a shiver; it didn't escape Mary Eunice's notice, who tugged up her blankets. "Thank you." Her hand slid out from under the cover, seeking its companion once again.

Mary Eunice took her hand without any comment. "Do you remember anything from last night?" she ventured in her meek, tentative voice, the quaver within it that Lana trusted.

She appraised her memories for a long moment. "I remember you," she replied. Her muscles relaxed. The more she thought, the longer this dragged on, the better she could distract herself from the pain. "You were singing—sort of. And sort of crying." Mary Eunice's breath skipped; Lana couldn't tell from the sound if she was chuckling or if she had started to cry again. "I'm sorry. I should've listened to you. I was afraid…"

"So was I." Mary Eunice rolled Lana's hand between hers; the friction provided warmth and rhythm. "I thought that I was going to lose you." Something soft and moist pressed to the first knuckle of Lana's fingers. That's what her lips feel like. The thought sent a tingle down Lana's spine. "I was praying for something—some miracle—" Lana craved more of her skin, more of the soothing caress of the pure flesh. "Seems like most of my prayers are about you, lately."

"I'm fine," Lana insisted, shoving the stammer out of her voice. "It's not that bad." It only feels like someone is dragging my insides out of my vagina with a rusty hook, don't worry. She bit her tongue. "What—What did they do to me?"

"The doctor told me they gave you a blood transfusion and repaired a tear on your uterus." The
pad of her thumb touched the corner of Lana's mouth, tracing back and forth across her face. "You should rest. You must be exhausted. You've been through a lot."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

Lana lifted her free hand to rest on the back of Mary Eunice's, securing it there on her cheek, its safety. She traced the creases of Mary Eunice's skin at the knuckles of each finger. "You haven't slept." She toyed with one slender digit; the callouses on the underside had begun to soften from disuse. "Or eaten, I would guess."

"I'm fine, Lana," Mary Eunice soothed. "You shouldn't worry about me. You need to focus on getting well." She removed her hand from Lana's cheek, and Lana resisted the urge to pin it back down; instead, she followed, palm open to keep Mary Eunice's fingers clutched in her own. As long as she had that hand, felt her skin, she knew she had a friend nearby. Like Mary Eunice read her thoughts, she said, "I'll stay right here with you, I promise."

"Don't let them give me anything." Another wave worked its way through her body, and she grimaced, jaws setting hard against one another, both hands clenching into fists. Behind her closed eyelids, the blackness hazed red, and as it passed, a chill shuddered through her. "I don't want any drugs. Promise." *You'll never sleep like this. It hurts too much. You'll get no rest.*

"Lana…" Her voice trembled, like she neared the verge of tears, and pity filled Lana. She had put Mary Eunice through the emotional wringer and still she squeezed that sponge, begging for a few more drops of water. "You're miserable. You don't deserve to feel like this."

Licking her sweaty upper lip, Lana chewed the inside of her cheek. It had already grown raw, carrying a metallic flavor. "Doesn't Mother Teresa believe suffering makes us holier?"

"I'm not Mother Teresa. I'm your friend, and I love you. I don't want you to hurt."

*I love you.* Lana offered a tender grin, fighting to relax her face. The more she reacted, the more Mary Eunice would worry. She didn't want Mary Eunice to worry, didn't want to keep fighting her. "I can't." As she explained, the staleness had returned to her mouth; she was thirsty. "My father's an addict. I don't want to play with that fire." Her thumb trailed over one of the callouses on Mary Eunice's hand, a distraction. As an afterthought, she whispered, "I love you, too," almost afraid to utter the words, that saying them would make them more real. "Promise?"

"I promise." The chair beside the bed creaked as Mary Eunice pulled it closer, scraping it over the tile floor. "Do you want some more water?" When Lana nodded, she soon found the plastic straw pressed against her lips again and sucked. "Tell me if you need something. That's why I'm here."

Lana swallowed. "Thank you." She ran her thumb along the ridge of Mary Eunice's. Exhaustion plagued her, but each time the pain pierced her again, her muscles drew up tight; she entered a cycle of perpetually attempting to soften her body while it defended itself from her firing nerve endings. When she clenched her hands, Mary Eunice probed the inside of her wrist, measuring her pulse. *Relax,* she urged herself. *Just sleep.* Her rolled gut ached.

She didn't know how long she suffered those waves, Mary Eunice silent but moving around her, touching her hand, praying—Lana heard her lips buffer against one another as she mouthed the words. Finally, she interrupted in a croak. "Sister?"

"Hm?"

*Oh, don't be such a child.* Her teeth worried the inside of her cheek again. She needed the
distraction. She needed to think of something else, something besides the pangs in her gut moving into her chest. "Will you tell me a story?"

Mary Eunice hesitated. "You mean, a Bible story?" she guessed, uncertain about the request.

"No—a story about you—or something, it doesn't matter." Lana licked the raw place inside her mouth. It had begun to bleed; she could taste the coppery flavor, like rusted metal. "Tell me about your rebellious teenage phase."

"Oh." The inquiry gave Mary Eunice a moment of pause. "Well—I suppose…" She cupped Lana's hand in her own like a bird. "I can tell you how I became a nun." Lana nodded, encouraging her onward, but when Mary Eunice gulped hard, like she struggled with her language, Lana wondered if she shouldn't have been so eager. She listened closely. This must be personal to her.

"When I left the eighth grade, I offered to leave school and get a job, but Aunt Celest wouldn't let me. I thought, at the time, that she valued my education—my prospects, that I would have more opportunities than she or my mother had had. I didn't realize until later that she needed me to be her free babysitter, that as long as I was in school, I was dependent on her. I suppose I've always been a little naive."

Part of Lana yearned to open her eyes and watch Mary Eunice as she narrated, but the other part told her to listen, that that was most important. "I was always the black sheep in school, but it was worse in high school. I had no friends. I missed a lot of class. I had to work part time, always around Aunt Celest's schedule, and I had to look after my family. There were times I came home from work and had enough time to shower before I went to school." The heavy sound of her sigh stung Lana, like the words hurt for Mary Eunice to say aloud, but she continued speaking nonetheless.

"I was desperate to fit in, and I tried to be cool. The first time I smoked a cigarette, I burned a hole in my only pair of jeans." Lana smiled at that, trying to picture Mary Eunice smoking a cigarette; it seemed incongruous with the woman she knew now, all things gentle and clean and pure. "In the tenth grade, a boy invited me to a dance. I went with him. There were so many people—so much alcohol, everyone was smoking and most of it wasn't tobacco. When he went to kiss me, I threw up all over his shoes. By the next Monday, everyone in school knew about it. 'Airy Mary can't hold her sherry,' was what they said." That sounds more like the Mary Eunice I know. Lana squeezed her hand, a sign that she was still awake, that she was still listening. Has she ever told anyone about this before? "Then, at the beginning of my senior year, one of the popular girls, Cheryl, noticed me. She invited me to a pool party at her house. She told me she wanted me to be the guest of honor—and I'd never even seen an in-ground pool before, not in real life."

Mary Eunice paused. "There were a lot of signs. I had never been noticed before, and suddenly, after twelve years of school together, she wanted to be my friend—a poor, awkward girl from the wrong side of town who was constantly shepherding around a bunch of kids." Her voice quivered. Oh, no, please don't cry. Lana traced the lines of one palm with her index finger. "All I ever wanted was for people to like me. So I paid Molly twenty dollars to watch the kids and not tell Aunt Celest that I had gone. It was almost a month's pay, but I thought it would be worth it if I finally had a friend.

"I went there that afternoon, to her house. I had to wear Aunt Celest's bathing suit. When I got there, Cheryl told me I didn't need it. She said they were skinny dipping." The shame tingled in Mary Eunice's tone as evident as a blush on her cheek. "Her parents weren't home. Everyone was drinking, all twenty-some of them, almost half of the class. I didn't have any—I didn't want to
throw up on someone, or in the pool. Then, Cheryl said they were ready to start swimming. She put me up on the diving board."

She broke off and sniffled. Lana, unable to tolerate her torment any longer without comment, said, "You don't have to tell me." The pain in her gut had faded to a twinge, her focus absorbed by the story, by the clenching of her heart at the thought of some rich, rogue teenagers taking advantage of a young Mary Eunice.

"I'm fine," Mary Eunice whispered. She removed one hand to wipe her eyes; when it returned to cup Lana's again, it was damp. "They said they would drop their robes on the count of three, and everyone got ready. And on three, I did it. I was the only one." She gulped the thickness in her throat. "It was an elaborate joke. They did it every year, each year to some new idiot, and they were all in on it. I was everyone's victim."

"That's terrible," Lana murmured. She could see it in her head, could imagine the shame of exposure and her own folly. Some arrogant kids who couldn't see a person's value outside of their monetary worth abused the gentle Mary Eunice, who had never harmed a soul before the devil himself entered her.

Continuing in her low, husky voice, Mary Eunice said, "I dropped my robe into the pool. I had to jump into the water to get it. The boys had cameras—the girls just laughed and laughed. Once I had my robe, I tried to climb out of the pool, but they kept pushing me back in. 'Hairy Mary,' they chanted. I was treading water there—I don't know how long. It seemed like hours. I thought I would drown before they let me get out of the pool." Lana massaged the heel of Mary Eunice's hand, the roughest part where she had kneaded bread for years.

"Maybe I would've. But a neighbor heard them over the fence and came to see what all the fuss was about. He told them he would call the cops if they didn't let me out. They had so much alcohol, so many drugs—they were all wealthy kids from important families, they couldn't be in trouble with the police. They let me climb out, and I ran away. I didn't even get my things—I put on my clothes and took off. I left my purse, my shoes, Aunt Celest's bathing suit.

"It was dusk, and I knew I couldn't go home—Aunt Celest would've been home, Molly couldn't lead her on that long, and she wouldn't have been sympathetic. She would've told me it was all my fault. She would've been right." Lana plucked her lip between her teeth. No, it wasn't your fault. She couldn't interrupt, even as Mary Eunice had to breathe and sniffle. "I went to the church. We were always faithful. Aunt Celest got a lot of help from the church, paying bills and stuff. It was the only place I knew I could go.

"Father William was there. I scared him to death, running in there, soaking wet and half-naked and crying. He thought I was in real trouble. But he listened to me. He offered to call the police, but it was my word against theirs—and I couldn't bear the thought of telling Aunt Celest what had happened. I was so… so ashamed." She swallowed audibly. Lana's hand stilled in her grasp; she could think of no other way to offer comfort. "I could have run in any direction, but I ran to God. Father William pointed that out to me. That was when I decided I was safest in the church, with God."

A silence passed, but Lana, a professional storyteller, could hear that Mary Eunice wasn't finished. "Father William let me stay in the church that night, and the next day, I sneaked home while Aunt Celest was at work to collect what I needed. I left them a note and almost all of my money. Father William took me to the abbey. They didn't ask many questions—I was accepted into postulancy two weeks later, and a novitiate by that December. That was where I met Sister Jude, and she recommended my placement at Briarcliff. Mother Claudia sent me with her."

This time, when she stopped, the words held a note of finality, but Lana allowed them to ring on
the air for a long time, tingling. "You didn't deserve any of that. It wasn't your fault." For the first time since she had awoken, her eyelids flicked, heavy and drawing into the dim light of the room. Mary Eunice's face was blurry but close, touching distance. Each time she blinked, the vision grew more precise, until she could make out the cupid's bow of Mary Eunice's lips and the very faint dusting of freckles across her cheeks and nose beneath the tracks of salty tears, now drying. "I'm sorry."

With a trembling sort of conviction, Mary Eunice murmured, "I'm not." Lana blinked, taken aback by her quiet announcement. "It brought me where I needed to be. I'm here, now, with you, because of that." She licked her lips, and Lana's eyes followed the movement, the smooth sliding of the wet muscle across the soft, pink skin. "My whole life, I wanted a friend, prayed for one. I joined the church seeking safety that no person had ever provided me. I thought I would always be alone, except for my faith." Lana imagined tracing those lips with her finger. *Stop, don't.* "But it makes sense, now. God has a plan. He put my feet on the path to you, so that I would have you at the appropriate time—when I needed you most."

Lana lifted her eyes to the deep blue depths of Mary Eunice's, and she plucked her hand from the tangle of fingers to bring it up to Mary Eunice's cheek, slightly blushing. She had shadows under her eyes, wrinkles at their corners; her bed-head hadn't left her. A large part of Lana thought she was full of shit, wanted to angrily protest, *Where the fuck was God when Wendy was being murdered?* but she could not do that to Mary Eunice, who had trusted Lana with her faith. "I'm glad you're here," she confided, and Mary Eunice placed her hand over it, holding it there, leaning into the welcome touch.

With the long gaze, Lana appraised her friend. "You're bleeding."

A frown broke the intimate, trusting look that Mary Eunice had given her as she glanced down at her bloodstained shirt; all of the spots had darkened to a brown now. "That's not mine. It's from last night."

"Not that, I see that. That—" Lana ducked her head to the blossoming red spot between Mary Eunice's legs, bright against the gray fabric.

She upstarted. "Oh! Oh, goodness, I'm bleeding!"

"I just said—" Mary Eunice's cheeks brightened into a shameful blush, and Lana bit back her bantering quip, fighting against her own coldness. "We're in a hospital. Go ask one of the nurses, I'm sure they'll give you some tampons. They're bound to have them lying around somewhere." She had never seen Mary Eunice turn so red before, all the way to the tips of her ears and the back of her neck, like she would have preferred to melt than confront the situation. "It's okay," Lana soothed. "No one's going to eat you, I promise. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

Mary Eunice scurried out of the room, and Lana reclined in the bed, staring up at the ceiling. *Thank God she's not pregnant.* She never thought she would think of a period, even someone else's period, as a blessing—the number of times she had gotten a mouthful of blood in lovemaking typically made her curse mother nature for giving lesbians the unnecessary reminder—but, in better health, she would have flung out of the bed and done a jig and cheered.

As things were, the mere thought of moving sent a pang through Lana's body; the bandages under her hospital gown scraped against her skin. *I want my money back,* she griped, thinking of the doctor with all of her metal tools and her lacking sympathy. But what could she do? Going public would inevitably expose her own involvement. And Lana had learned her lesson with snooping around for stories; she would not attempt to go undercover again. Her hand, now empty and having nothing to hold, crossed her chest while she considered, reflected. The guilt simmered on the roof of her mouth with its sour flavor. She had killed Wendy for a story. *I got what I goddamn
wanted.

Lana's hand moved lower while she forced herself to breathe through the tightening of her stomach and fought to move her thoughts elsewhere. Then, in her mind's eye, she saw Mary Eunice scantily clad in a robe, perched on a diving board, those hesitant blue eyes seeking approval. They still did, begged for it when she performed a task, and brightened when Lana offered even a shred of admiration. Why did they break her? Her hand drew up into a fist in the sheets, shivering, sweat dripping down her temples. She didn't deserve that.

Footsteps sounded outside the room, and Lana fought to relax her face and muscles. "Sister?" she called out as the door handle turned. But a white shoe pushed its way into the door; the face of an unfamiliar nurse followed. Lana's jaw tightened as her heartbeat quelled. "Hello." It's just a nurse. The thought did not allay the pressure inside of her.

"Miss Winters! I thought you'd be awake." The nurse had a bag of fluid. "It's time to change your IV bag. This ought to take some of the edge off. I would imagine you're not incredibly uncomfortable right now, are you?"

Eyes widening, Lana protested, "No, I—"

"Well, this will take care of things. You should be resting." With nimble fingers, the nurse stripped her old bag and replaced it with the drip into her arm.

Lana started to jerk her arm, but the nurse pinned it down, paying little heed to her insistent, "No—I don't want that—"

"Afraid of needles, huh? I used to be, too. Look at me now." The woman chuckled at her own joke. "Dr. Maude will be in to see you in an hour or two. We want you to be comfortable until then. You haven't been approved for lunch yet, but I'll have a dinner menu brought up. Would you like some crackers or more water?"

"No—" Lana's lip twisted downward at the nurse's lackluster listening skills. What the hell happened to a bedside manner? Panic fluttered in her chest. "I don't want any—"

"Alright, no biggie. I wouldn't be hungry if I were you, either, and this will keep you hydrated." A low whistle winded from the older woman's lips. "Your sister is in for the long haul, isn't she? I had one of the candy stripers give her those slippers. Poor girl. She was inconsolable when you came in."

"She's not my—"

The nurse tutted, "Poor girl. Anyway, my shift is almost over. Your new nurse is called Teresa, and I'm sure she'll introduce herself when she comes by. Just press the button if you need her for anything. That's what we're here for."

She patted Lana's shoulder, and Lana recoiled with a hiss, but the nurse left without paying any notice to her. Her tongue had numbed, unwilling to form words, and her attempt to sit up sent her reeling back upon the bed and gasping for air, the pain too great to surmount. "Sister—" One hand floundered at the emptiness beside her. She's not there. She went to the bathroom, remember? "Oh, fuck." Why is it always me? Her brain drank the drug so that she floated pleasantly in a state of warm drowsiness, like on a cloud, the sunshine on her face; the tightness of the bandage had ebbed somewhere into the gray, and after a short struggle, her resistance faded into sleep, easy and comfortable.

...
In the bathroom down the hall, Mary Eunice unwrapped the tampon with shaking hands. She had asked for one of these because Lana had told her to, but she had never used one before—Sister Jude said they were obscene and robbed a woman of her purity. As a nun, Mary Eunice wasn’t sure that she believed that, but it had always benefited her to accept whatever Sister Jude said and move on with her life, and the church didn’t provide tampons, so she was subject to the supplies allotted to her.

The shame came irregularly—she had never bled on a regular cycle, and that made it worse, harder to predict—when she slunk up the stairway to heaven to Sister Jude’s office and knocked (or didn’t; Sister Jude berated her frequently for entering without invitation) at the large door, dread pooling in the pit of her stomach, face almost as red as the blood in her panties, and gave the head nun the stammering request for a few menstruation pads. Sister Jude would never allow her more than a few. She would fix Sister Mary Eunice under a stern, disappointed gaze, and Mary Eunice would buckle and apologize and avert her eyes until Sister Jude relented and gave her the necessary supplies, and then Mary Eunice would walk away, heavy and humiliated.

Lana said there was nothing to be ashamed of, looked at her strangely when she began to discolor, abashed at her own state, and the nonchalance, the nonchalance, set off a strange curdling in the pit of Mary Eunice's stomach. *Or maybe those are just the cramps.* She licked her lips as she studied the device the nurse had provided her. *This doesn't look even slightly comfortable.* Still, it was all she had. She had to give it a shot.

"Ow, ow, ow—" *That can't be right.* Swallowing hard, she toyed with the plastic tube, staring at it, hoping it would give her an answer. This was one problem that she didn't think she could pray about. *Is it supposed to hurt?* Of course not. Lana had told her to ask for a tampon, and Lana wouldn’t tell her to do anything that would cause her a significant amount of pain. That left the single option: she was doing it wrong.

It took several more tries at insertion before she managed to put it in, and it still twinged inside of her when she moved. She winced at the sensation, plucking at her lip, wondering if it was right or if she was going to have a leak. Embarrassment boiled in her chest between her heart and lungs and twisted at her lips. The large stain the crotch of her pajamas would remain until Lana went home; Mary Eunice had no one to call to take her back to the house for a change of clothes, nor did she have any cash to afford a taxi. And, even provided both of those things, the thought of leaving Lana alone upset her. *Lana wouldn't leave me,* Mary Eunice acknowledged. *Lana would stay and make sure they took care of me.* Lana also knew how to properly insert a tampon, and she would’ve had the forethought to wear shoes and pack a go-bag before the ambulance came.

Her belly cramped again, and she massaged the lump in her lower abdomen, considering all of the things she flushed. *Not pregnant.* She flew a little higher with that particular thought. She had the opportunity to return to her life. She wasn't strapped to a baby for the rest of her days. They wouldn’t convert Lana's office into a nursery. She wouldn't revoke her vows. The blood meant she could *continue.*

Still, a pang almost like regret rippled through her chest, a rueful consideration for what might have been if the cards had fallen differently, and she spiraled headlong into a fantasy, viewing it like a memory.

*The bed creaked in the darkness of the bedroom as an infant's cry filled the house, and Mary Eunice's eyes flicked open when a nose nuzzled against the back of her neck. "Mary," Lana murmured, slurring with sleep; she rested a hand on Mary Eunice's waist. "Mary Eunice, wake up. Your daughter's awake. Ma-ry." She dragged out the name in a yawn.*

*Mary Eunice rolled onto her back and blinked at the ceiling with bleary eyes. "My daughter? I thought she was ours," she teased. The cold air tingled at her toes as she began to relieve herself*
of the covers, and goosebumps appeared on her arms.

"Before dawn, she's always yours." Lana smirked as Mary Eunice tugged the covers back over her in an effort to keep her warm, and she extended one arm—no longer painfully thin from malnutrition, but soft and dimpled—to bat her away. "The baby, Mary Eunice," she reminded. "I'll be here when you get back."

With her persuasion, Mary Eunice left her, headed up the hall to the living room. Like Lana had promised, the office was converted into a nursery, the walls painted a pale yellow, a white crib in the corner; above it, the wall read, "Eleanor," and Mary Eunice approached and lifted her out of bed. "Sh, it's alright," she soothed, but the fussy baby whined and tossed her fists. "I suppose it's time for you to eat again, isn't it? Goodness, it's chilly. We'll get you a space heater soon." Mary Eunice swaddled her in a blanket. "You're already outgrowing your clothes again! You're getting so big. Just wait until you have teeth."

Mary Eunice tiptoed out of the office, the shag carpet muffling her footsteps, but nothing could muffle the baby's frustrated cries. "Shush, shush, Ellie. You woke up Lana again." The faucet in the kitchen turned on, and Mary Eunice flinched; Eleanor promptly howled in response to the jerk. "Lana?" Every muscle in her body tensed.

"It's just me." Lana peeked out of the kitchen, shaking a bottle of milk in one hand, and Mary Eunice released a relieved sigh, bouncing Eleanor in an attempt to soothe her. "Believe me, with lungs like those, no robber is going to want anything to do with us. She's better than a guard dog."

"I thought you were going back to sleep. You have to work tomorrow." Mary Eunice's teeth worried her lower lip as she provided a finger to sate Eleanor; the baby quieted to suck on it. Lana grinned with mischief. "It's important for a father to aid in child care, you know." At that, they both offered weak chuckles. Mary Eunice sought her expression for irritation that the baby had woken her once again, but Lana had none of that. She dropped the bottle of formula into the bowl of steaming water to warm it. Tiredness crinkled the corners of her eyes, but she didn't have the hollow look by which Mary Eunice recognized Lana; it was like those holes Bloody Face left in her soul were finally filled.

"I'm sorry," Mary Eunice said anyway, because she knew nothing better than to apologize. "I don't mean for her to be a nuisance—"

"She's a baby, Mary Eunice. She's going to cry." As if on cue, the baby twisted away from the pacifying finger and screwed up her face in a tiny wail once again. "And she's mine as much as she is yours. She's family. Both of you are."

Her cheeks flushed. "Thank you, Lana." Eleanor tossed up her arms and wailed. "Yes, yes, I see you. We're working on it. It doesn't make itself, you know. Just hold tight, and we'll fix you right up, a full belly and a few hours of sleep for us. I know, you probably think that's horrible. Haven't we just thwarted all your plans to keep us exhausted for the rest of our lives?" She responded to each fussy bump from the baby like an independent sentence, holding a conversation as fluidly with Eleanor as she would have with Lana.

Lana observed, lips quirked. "I love watching you talk to her. You're so good with her."

Mary Eunice smelled the top of Eleanor's head, clutching her close like a favored teddy bear, all delicate but still soft. She smelled clean, like baby powder. "She likes you more."

"Oh, bullshit. She always looks at me like I've got dirt on the tip of my nose or something. It's a
little disconcerting." Lana removed the bottle from the warm pot of water and shook it, testing the temperature on her wrist. "Give her here."

Mary Eunice obediently handed over the baby, not hesitating; she trusted Lana fully with the life of her daughter. Lana swept her into a cradled position and provided the bottle, which Eleanor accepted, both clumsy hands pawing at it. Quiet sucking noises and happy grunts followed, and Mary Eunice shuffled nearer to watch. "She's beautiful, Mary. She looks just like you." A blush teased her cheeks, and she ducked her head, trying to think of an appropriate thanks while the compliment tied her tongue. "But her eyes. She has his eyes."

Her heart sank at that observation, one she had already made. Eleanor had round eyes the color of dark chocolate, barely discernible from her pupils. "I think of them as your eyes," she provided in response to Lana's musing. As she spoke, Lana looked at her, gaze soft with affection that made Mary Eunice melt inside. "I love you," she said, timid at the announcement.

A tender expression curled upon Lana's lips. "I love you, too." She leaned in, bodies bumping, baby sucking along happily, and with puckered lips, Mary Eunice caved toward Lana, expecting the contact to come at any moment—warm, succulent, wet, filled with hope and love—

Mary Eunice jarred herself out of the daydream before Lana's lips touched hers, and one hand fluttered to her mouth as if to ensure her lips were still attached; they hadn't vanished into the dream. "What was that?" she asked herself aloud, voice almost a yelp, and her heart raced in her ribcage. At the sink, she scrubbed her hands and washed her face, but she couldn't detach herself from the vision. It was so vivid, like a memory or a real-time experience; she could smell the top of Eleanor's head, and her tongue yearned for the taste of Lana's lips.

Was this lust? It didn't feel lustful. She had always imagined lust with hunger behind it, greed inside it, a taste for all the things not belonging to her. Her feelings for Lana didn't have any of that; they were soft and affectionate and well-earned. But the twist inside her gut told her she had sinned, an instinct. Immediately, she dropped into a prayer. Lord, forgive me, purify my spirit so that I may become nearer to You. Grant me the strength to support Lana and love her as long as You intend in the way that You intend. Heal her with Your grace and guide her with Your wisdom. Cleanse my thoughts of all things not written in Your will.

There was no Eleanor (though, if there were a baby, she certainly would have named her Eleanor, after her mother), and the daydream was some combination of wishful thinking driven by a lack of sleep and too much time spent worrying over Lana's imminent death. She patted her face dry with the paper towels and tried to lay her hair a little flatter in the mirror. The daydream lingered, all concern collected in it like a picnic basket, in the back of her mind; her prayer had not alleviated the stress attached to it. That left her second option, which had recently held the most comfort for her: talking to Lana.

The thought made her flame with blush once again. She didn't know where she would begin that conversation. Lana's sick. She doesn't need to deal with your stupidity right now. Mary Eunice licked her lips and left the bathroom, hugging herself, eyes down to the ground as she shuffled back to room 111. Entering, she returned to the chair she had vacated a few minutes earlier. Lana had her eyes closed, but as Mary Eunice touched her hand, they opened, sheened with a reflective gloss. They trembled, unable to focus. Her face flushed pink. "I'm sorry," Mary Eunice apologized. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay." Lana yawned and lifted the hand that had taken hers to her cheek, still damp from being washed earlier. Lana's face was hot to the touch. "Cold hands. Feels good." She nestled into the touch, wriggling with trembles to her skin. "Glad you're back."

Mary Eunice pursed her lips. "Are you okay?" she pressed in a delicate voice. Lana had lost her
inhibitions, face no longer drawn and white with pain, and while Mary Eunice didn't like to see her hurting, she also worried over the sudden change in mood.

"Bitchy nurse came in. Wouldn't listen to me. I tried to tell her no…" Both round eyes lifted up to the IV bag, now plump and filled once again, and Mary Eunice's heart sank. "Dumb old hag wouldn't listen to me."

"I'm sorry, Lana." Mary Eunice scooted her chair closer; her back ached when she leaned over the bed. Her whole body had a dull throb to it, sleep-deprived and sore from the herculean effort she had exerted carrying Lana through the house. You promised you wouldn't let them drug her! Stupid! "I shouldn't have left you." The corner of Lana's lips had a dry, soft texture, and they looked chapped. She could have brushed them with her thumb if she wanted. But the prospect made her belly flip with thoughts of the daydream again, and she chased them away while Lana grunted in return. "How do you feel?"

Lana's lips winced into a crooked expression, not quite a smile, not a grimace. "Numb. Warm." She held Mary Eunice's gaze. "Sleepy. Don't wanna sleep. Don't want 'em to give me anything else."

"I won't let them," Mary Eunice assured. "Rest. You need it. You won't get better if you don't sleep." She started to remove her hand from Lana's cheek, but Lana pinned it back down. A fond chuckle rose from the nun, laced with nervousness. "Do you want me to get you a cloth for your face?"

"Mhm." By the time the nurse had answered the call Mary Eunice placed, Lana had dozed off, and Mary Eunice folded it on her forehead. Lana mumbled and grunted in her drowsy state, fighting to resurface again. "You…"

"Me?" Lana's hand fluttered from the bed, and Mary Eunice caught it. "I won't leave." It seemed to satisfy her, as she didn't make another sound. Mary Eunice hiked up her legs in the plastic chair in an attempt to find some comfort, some rest. It felt like years ago she had awoken to find Lana sleeping in a pool of her own blood, years ago since she had last closed her eyes and rested. Hunger gnawed a gaping pit in her belly. What had she eaten yesterday? A sandwich, she remembered; she had eaten it while Lana slept and bled.

As her eyes drowsed, head throbbing from hunger, visions hazed in her mind. She was on the diving board again, falling into the pool, but it was filled with blood. Sinking into it, the coppery flavor of Clara's blood inside her mouth tanged upon her tongue.

She spat it and swung away from the body, but she bounced off of Dr. Arden's chest, his eyes flashing with delight as she stumbled back with a squeak. The scene whirled around. They were in his office. He grinned. "Little Sister!" he greeted in his warm, grandfatherly tone. "My ray of sunshine." But the demon could hear his thoughts, knew he had no grandfatherly feelings toward the innocent nun; his tiny penis hardened at the mere thought of her. It excited the demon. Mary Eunice, buried deep within, wept.

Please, not him, too! He's my friend!

A dark chuckle twisted within her mind. Oh, darling child, I have no intentions of killing your Nazi doctor. There are far more sinister ways to put him to good use. Dr. Arden regarded her with the same smile. "So, tell me, how are you doing?" He took off his glasses, clipped them to the front of his suit coat. Really, a charming man. Too bad his cock is the size of your pinkie finger.

"I did another feeding last night." The mention of the creatures made Mary Eunice push back against the demon. They ate Clara! I fed them Clara! Her willpower grew, but she throttled against a brick wall. She could not overpower the parasite leeching off of her soul. "The creatures
are getting hungrier." Her body leaned forward with interest; his audible heartbeat increased the nearer she drew to him, his blood racing faster. "I'm worried, Doctor. What will happen when it's freezing? And now, this storm?"

He leaned away from her. Her pull was too strong. Oh, he positively wants to ravish you! The demon clucked its tongue. We can have some fun with this one, Sister. "We only have to get them through the winter." He rested a hand on her knee. "I can't tell you how much your compassion for these creatures means to me." His skin was warm with the flush of sexual attraction, itched at her through her habit. The demon made her so sensitive, everything too bright, too spicy, too loud, too hot.

"Oh, please." The demon delivered the words in Mary Eunice's same, low voice, but it had a vocabulary beyond her, ideas she had never considered, prospects to which she had never been exposed. "You know you brought me in here just so you can undress me with your eyes." Stop it! Mary Eunice protested. That's a lie! But she could hear Dr. Arden's thoughts now, and she knew that her naivete had swallowed her once again. Even as his face fell in distress, his mind reeling, he wondered how she found out rather than why she considered such a fallacious concept. "Imagine sucking on my rosebud tits." One hand combed her long, golden hair out of her coif and habit.

He recoiled. He's ashamed of his tiny cock before you've even seen it, the demon chuckled inwardly. What a pathetic excuse for a man. He creates these human experiments because he wants to find the miracle cure for his microphallus, so he may impress you. But we're already impressed, aren't we, precious? "Don't talk like that!" The sharp words uttered by the doctor sent the demon straightening in her chair, surprised by Dr. Arden's denial. Oh, we can work with that, grandpa.

She stood, and her mouth opened into the small O that Dr. Arden loved. I'm so sorry, Doctor! It isn't me! "Come on, big boy. Show me what you've got." She winked, coy, and perched upon his lap; he was equal parts disgusted and mesmerized, gaping back at her, astonished by her change in character. "Your little bride of Christ has had an awakening. Not to the Lord, but to the power of sex." Her hand trailed up the rough parts of his neck, the stubble there, the wrinkles and moles. "Lust, desire..." No, I haven't, I've never! Please don't make me!

As if he heard the weeping of her soul, Dr. Arden upstarted and flung her back. "Stop it!" The demon stumbled, but she landed on the desk—Perfect. "Stop it."

Her legs spread out, revealing her tights; she drew up the skirt of her habit. "Put your mouth where you want to," she purred, the angle wide, alluring to him. He's fighting so hard to resist us, my sweet. Eventually, it will be futile. We always get what we want. "Don't let it go to waste, Doc." She reclined upon the desk, leaning back, making the host body vulnerable. You make him salivate. He wants to smell your virgin pussy. "I'm all juicy." He wants to taste your cunt—I can't wait to see the look on his groveling face—

Before the demon could finish its purring, perverted thought, Dr. Arden slapped her hard across the face; her lip split inside her mouth, and she trailed her tongue over the broken spot, shocked by his shift from his thoughts to his actions. "Shut your filthy mouth!"

Now, that's just offensive. She sat up slowly, curling her toes in her Mary Janes. Then, the demon allowed her to release a cackle, so unlike the pure laughter that Mary Eunice would give—not that Mary Eunice laughed frequently. Laughter was incongruous with the atmosphere of Briarcliff, and Sister Jude found it distracting. "I didn't know you were such a sad little pantywaist."

He hurled his hands at her again, but this time, the demon was prepared, ducked out of the way. The demon had to protect its mortal host from harm. It had great use for her. "Get out of my
office!" She didn't stop laughing, but obediently, she replaced her coif and straightened her hair beneath it.

As she passed him, Mary Eunice clawed her way to the surface, like unearthing herself from the grave, and she looked up at him, all six and a half feet of him. Thank you, Doctor, she wanted to say, but she knew she could not without weeping, and the demon squashed her again. Lord, please, release me—grant me the strength to save myself—Please, God—

The visceral voice snarled in response, There is no God, Sister!

"Sister?" A hand on her thigh woke her, and she jerked up out of her sleep; her neck cracked from where she had drifted off. She yelped, and her hands flew to cover her mouth to stifle her surprise. Lana flinched at her reaction. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"I—I'm sorry—I was dreaming—"

"You apologize more than an old lady farts." Lana's voice had regained its clarity, gaze sharp, one hand cinched in the blankets; Mary Eunice looked to her IV bag, but it had deflated again. How long was I asleep? "Are you alright?" Lana studied her as Mary Eunice nodded, stiff, and tried to wriggle her way around in the chair. "Bad dream?"

Her lips pursed, a slight tremble to them. "I'm fine," she assured, and she struggled to find a smile somewhere in the thick drowsiness of her mind. Her body didn't feel like hers anymore; she was a guest inside it, waiting for the owner to return. She put a hand on her belly, still aching and gnarled with hunger. "I dreamed about you, earlier," she reminisced. Lana inclined an eyebrow. "That was a good dream. I wish all dreams were like that."

The daydream about Lana and their nonexistent daughter confused her, but it didn't frighten her and didn't sicken her, and these days, she would have cut off her feet to have a guarantee of a good night's sleep. The corner of Lana's mouth tipped upward, not quite a smile, but not displeased, either. "I'm glad." She turned away, staring up at the ceiling. "The nurse just came by. They're going to have dinner here shortly. But I can ask for some crackers if you're hungry."

"I'm fine."

"I'm beginning to think you would say that until the day you starved to death." Mary Eunice averted her eyes, blushing at Lana's honest statement; she had no retort prepared. "You can't even deny it," Lana teased her, gentle. Her hand shifted off of the bed, as if seeking its companion, but after a brief consideration, she tucked it back under the blankets. "You'll have to tell me all about that dream sometime."

Mary Eunice nodded. She shifted in her chair; her sore back didn't want to bend to her command. "I will," she promised. But not right now. Her hand itched for Lana's. She stuffed the urge away.

Silence swallowed them for a long moment; Mary Eunice wriggled with discomfort, Lana staring at the ceiling. "Sister?" she murmured after a little bit. She straightened at the address. "Do you think that this is my punishment for everything that I've done?" Mary Eunice blinked, taken aback by Lana's straightforward question. "All of my—my sins."

"God doesn't work that way, Lana," she murmured. "God doesn't punish us and reward us in this life. Then there would be no purpose behind heaven and hell." Her mouth worried into a line while she struggled to answer Lana's question.

"Do you think I'm going to hell?"

"No one knows—it's part of the mystery—"
"I asked for your opinion, not a theological lecture."

She frowned. "I don't get an opinion. It's not my business." Lana narrowed her eyes, frustrated at the avoidance, and Mary Eunice skipped to a different answer. "God knows your heart—more than I do." Her hands clasped in her lap as she quoted, "Galatians tells us the fruits of the Spirit. 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.' And I think you've got all of those, when it matters most." Her voice hushed, thoughtful. "You've shown kindness when it was undeserved, patience where it was unwarranted, gentleness where cruelty would have sufficed."

Lana's gaze flicked down to her hand, where she had tucked it away, and she reached out for Mary Eunice's. She had words upon her face, but down the hall, a cart rattled, and Lana did not have the time to say anything that she would've liked. "Thank you, Sister."

The smell of hospital food had never enticed Mary Eunice more. In the blink of an eye, she had forgotten her darkness once again, her life lit and joy guarded by Lana's spiritual sentry.
The following evening, Lana was discharged with specific instructions about caring for her sutures and a prescription for antibiotics and painkillers, and she called Lois to give them a ride home; Lois was on her way to work and didn't have the time to come inside. Lana wouldn't admit it, but she had made the request for that reason—she didn't feel like dealing with any company. Mary Eunice didn't count; she had grown so exhausted that she hardly spoke, eyes turning glazed when she drifted off. "Call us," Lois called after them. "Keep us in the loop."

Lana promised to do just that as she slid out of the car and grappled at Mary Eunice for support. Mary Eunice looked positively haggard, her hair all matted, and both of them smelled like rusty, dried blood. Her incision tugged when she straightened too much, so she stooped; Mary Eunice steadied her. "Do you have the keys?" Lana asked, blinking the bleariness from her eyes.

She hesitated. "I—I didn't lock up—"

"That's right. I was dying. I remember now." The step up into the house seemed insurmountable. "Jesus fucking Christ, I feel like someone ran over me with a truck." Lana staggered up onto the step, and Mary Eunice propped her up. The carpet squelched underfoot, shag and comforting, and Lana sat on the couch, wincing.

"I'll get you some Tylenol." And there she goes, slaving over me once again. Lana bit her lip, resisting the urge to tell Mary Eunice to sit down and rest for a minute or two, and she stared hard at her feet, covered by tall socks pulled up to her calves. She wanted to take them off, but she couldn't bend over. Her old clothing, heavy with bloodstains, reeked of mold.

Mary Eunice returned to Lana with her pills and the glass of water; she didn't suggest a painkiller, eyes all crinkled at the edges with a perpetual exhaustion. Beside Lana, she placed a pile of clothing on the couch. "Thank you," Lana murmured, voice low and hoarse. Mary Eunice smiled at her, tired but comforting, and she rolled up Lana's pant legs to strip off her hospital socks. "You don't have to…" She muffled a yawn with the palm of her hand.

"I want to," Mary Eunice soothed. "I need to put the clothes to wash. Do you want my help?"

Lana flushed at the suggestion in spite of herself. Oh, don't be such a child. Mary Eunice had seen far worse things at Briarcliff. "I—I might need it." She wriggled to try to draw her arms through the sleeves of her pajama shirt, but the movement made her ache and cringe, so Mary Eunice stilled her with calm hands and drew it up over her head. "You don't have to do this," Lana mumbled again. She shrunk, wanting to shield herself from potential judgment. The house held a certain cold misery. Her exposed nipples pebbled with the temperature.

But Mary Eunice didn't break eye contact as she helped replace the top with a long, fleece nightgown. "I'm going to take care of you, Lana. You're my friend. You deserve it." Lana lifted herself off of the couch to remove her stained pajama pants and ruined underwear. "I have to strip the bed. Do you have extra sheets?"
The evening passed in the same hollow movements, Lana observing from the sofa while Mary Eunice put the laundry to wash, boiled some hotdogs and spaghetti noodles. She boiled some sauce and dumped it into the mixture; it had a soured smell, but she tasted it off of the spoon before she brought Lana a plate with a bubbling glass of soda. "We're running out of things to eat, aren't we?" Lana observed as she sat up a little straighter.

Mary Eunice shrugged. "We're out of bread, but I think I can make due for another day or two, until you feel better." She folded herself onto the other side of the couch, each of them staring at the blank television screen, neither of them caring enough to turn it on and see how the world had worsened since they went to the hospital. Mary Eunice shifted her position every few minutes, unable to find comfort.

"Are you okay?" Lana ventured, her lips pursed. She had a wad of spaghetti wrapped around her fork with a chunk of hotdog on the end, but she fixed her gaze upon Mary Eunice, who looked back at her, startled by the question. "You're fidgeting."

Her cheeks flushed pink. "I—I'm just a little sore," she muttered, ducking her head. "I'm fine." She stared back down at her own plate, toes curling into the carpet.

"I'm not exactly a sack of feathers, am I?" Lana snorted in return. "You shouldn't have tried to carry me around. You could've really hurt yourself." She delivered the line gently, like a reminder, as she recalled the floating sensation that had accompanied moving in Mary Eunice's arms. Mary Eunice shrouded her in safety, a heavy blanket.

"I was scared," Mary Eunice admitted, lips drawn into a frown. "I was so afraid that—that if I left, you would be gone by the time I came back." She pushed the noodles around on her plate, and Lana's heart plummeted into her stomach when she realized that she had stolen Mary Eunice's appetite. "Do you remember—in the ambulance—when you were talking to someone?"

Lana frowned. "I was talking to you." She fought for her memories of the ambulance. By then, everything had gained a certain bright haze, all the lights having halos and Mary Eunice's face reminding her of an angel. An angel. Yes, she had seen the woman in black again. "But—no, you're right. There was someone else. An elderly woman with a black shawl." As she sipped her soda, she considered the memory. "I saw her before, with Thredson." It had hurt, then, saying no, turning her away; she still didn't know why she had chosen to stay. The second time, though, it did not hurt. She had chosen Mary Eunice. "It was easier to say no this time. To stay with you."

"I didn't have a choice," Mary Eunice mumbled. Lana studied the side of her face. Their dinner was cooling in the plates. Neither of them paid any heed to it. "She tried to help me, but I wasn't strong enough. Even with her there—" She shook her head, and a tear rolled down her cheek, dribbled into the food. "I was so weak."

Mary Eunice curled tighter up against herself. "Would you have gone with her?" Lana probed. She clutched the front of her shirt in a fist, eyes downcast. "I would have done anything to get that thing out of me," she whispered. Licking her lips, she drew a hand up to her chest and rested it there. "I would have killed myself if I had the strength, but—" She shook her head, pressed into a firm frown. "I never had enough control. Every time I tried, it stopped me."

"I know it's small comfort." Lana held her gaze, waiting for Mary Eunice to look at her. "But I'm glad you're here now." She forked up another mouthful of spaghetti and hotdog.

"I'm glad I'm here, too." Mary Eunice copied Lana's movements, but she still toyed with the fork,
not putting it in her mouth. "The Monsignor gave me a phone number for some counseling, with a priest. Mother Claudia wants me to go to him before I'm reassigned. Do you think that I should?"

Lana hesitated. *What kind of question is that?* She opened her mouth to respond with the obvious—*well, duh*—but then she strangled the sarcasm on her tongue and waited for a more considerate response. "I think it would be good for you to hear the faithful opinion of someone who believes the same that you do." She washed down the noodles with a sip of soda. "And if you don't feel comfortable with him, then you explain that to Mother Claudia and ask for an alternative." Mary Eunice nodded along, but her face had an unsettled expression, telling Lana she had not yet reached the source of the troublesome feelings. "Do you not want to go to counseling?" she pressed, delicate.

"I…" Mary Eunice plucked her lower lip between her teeth. "I'm ashamed of my sins." She didn't look at Lana, so Lana heaved herself nearer on her arms, wincing at the pain in her gut. Mary Eunice startled and rushed to steady her, but Lana took her hand and rolled warmth into it. "You haven't judged me, Lana, and I'm so grateful for that."

"I know I'm a religious ignoramus," Lana said, "but I think that most priests aren't in the business of being judgmental. And—as much as I dislike the Monsignor—I can only assume he wants to help you recover and regain your faith. If he intended to sabotage you, he would have done it before now."

Mary Eunice smiled at her, somewhat watery but still positive. "You always know what to say." She traced the crease of Lana's palm with one long index finger. "I don't know how you do it. You always make me feel better, even when I'm hopeless." Lana waited for her to finish, sensing the lack of finality in her words. "I have so many holes in my spirit, now." The pink line of her lips wavered, but she continued, "It's like I was riddled with bullets, and somehow I got up, and I kept walking around, but when I woke up, here, with you, all of those wounds were bleeding." She gulped. "And I still feel them, weeping, in my soul. But when I'm with you, they don't hurt as much anymore. You bandage and disinfect them. Maybe they're not—healing—I don't think they'll ever heal—but you make me feel like I have a whole soul again."

She turned Lana's hands to study them, quieting, and another tear rolled down her cheek. Lana brushed it away with the knuckle of her forefinger. "I'm here, Sister, as long as you need me. I don't have anywhere else to be." Mary Eunice leaned into her, their heads resting against one another until the dinner had gone completely cold.

The timer on the washing machine roused Mary Eunice; she transferred the bedsheets into the dryer. They had ugly, blotted stains, but Lana didn't concern herself with them. The odds that she would sleep with anyone other than Mary Eunice in the coming months were slim to none, and any woman knew the horror of staining a favored garment or set of blankets. Mary Eunice brought her a blanket and took their plates, packaged the leftovers in the refrigerator. "Is it okay with you if I take a shower?"

*Absolutely not. I forbid you from ever showering again.* Lana smirked at the sarcastic thoughts, but she didn't utter them, knowing that Mary Eunice would trip over herself if she tried to make that particular joke. "I'm fine, go ahead." Lana waved her off, ignoring the stench rising from her own body. The doctor had said she could take a sponge bath as long as she protected her incision, but she couldn't ask that much aid of Mary Eunice. She could not sacrifice her own pride to request it. Perhaps she could sponge herself off when she brushed her teeth, at least enough to put on some antiperspirant.

After Mary Eunice came back from the shower and combed through her hair, she dressed the bed. She returned to Lana and helped her to her feet. "I can walk," Lana assured, and she did so with no small amount of pain, one hand on the wall; Mary Eunice shadowed her like a faithful dog.
"I'm going to tidy up." Her voice gained a certain strain. Mary Eunice opened her mouth, but Lana waved her off. "Lie down," she urged. "I'm fine."

Mary Eunice hesitated, and Lana knew she hadn't convinced her nebbish friend. "I can wash your hair," she offered. Lana narrowed her eyes. "I know you don't feel well. It will make you feel cleaner, at least until you're able to shower again." With an urgent curl to her lips, she continued in a reminder, "You helped me when I first came here. I would like to help you."

One lock of chestnut hair left a smear on Lana's cheek, and she relented at the gross sensation of it sliding over her face. Mary Eunice pulled one of the kitchen chairs in front of the bathroom sink. Pressure built in her chest as she reclined, head back into the pedestal sink that Mary Eunice had filled with warm water. Each breath was a battle, and she closed her eyes, only for Bloody Face to haze into her mind. She clenched her jaw and focused on the soothing sensation of fingers combing against her scalp, soaking her hair in the warm water. Mary Eunice's short fingernails scraped the oil through Lana's hair; she hummed a soft tune as she worked, one that Lana recognized from her days in church, when she had followed her father's finger in the hymnal and listened to the rumble of the congregation alongside the pianist.

"That's an old hymn," she observed, eyelids flickering. "It's not Catholic, is it?"

"No," Mary Eunice answered. Her hands vanished and then returned with some cool shampoo in her palms. "It was my mother's favorite. She used to sing it while she cleaned house. It's one of the few things that I remember of her." She worked the shampoo into a lather and dragged it through Lana's hair.

"It was my mother's favorite, too," Lana hummed. "She played the piano for our church. We sang it every Sunday. She had it memorized." Then, in an off-tune voice, she murmured, "Then sings my soul, my savior, God, to thee—how great thou art—Jesus Christ, I really am tired. I'm singing hymns."

Mary Eunice laughed, and Lana's eyes opened just wide enough to watch the nun's face alight with joy; she still carried those tired shadows under her eyes, but her mouth was open in a grin, and the musical sound floated out of her and sent Lana's heart fluttering higher into her chest. "Sing it with me," she encouraged. Her eyes twinkled with an innocent affection, and as she led into the first verse, Lana didn't have the strength to deny her.

"Oh Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds thy hands have made, I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed." The words were meaningless to Lana, a nonbeliever, but when Mary Eunice celebrated her faith, she glowed with her own strength, mouth curled into a perpetual smile. Lana saw, reflected in those blue eyes, a vivid peace there. She is the most divine person I have ever known.

"When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation to take me home, what joy shall fill my heart." Lana had known so many who filled themselves with belief, who inflated their egos with the hypocrisy of the church and shielded their bigotry behind an impenetrable fortress of faith. But in Mary Eunice, she found the opposite—a humble woman, second-guessing all of her choices, seeking guidance and reassurance constantly, consolidating every new thing she experienced with her faith. "Then I shall bow in humble adoration, and there proclaim, 'My God, how great thou art.'" Her face held more holiness than Lana had ever found in a church.

They continued the song, both of them off-tune, and when it finished, they both laughed, weak chuckles, causing Lana's abdomen to ache while Mary Eunice spun her wet hair into a braid again. "What are you doing?" she pressed. "It's nighttime."

She paused. "If you leave it in overnight, it will be wavy in the morning. I used to do it for my
cousins on Saturday nights, since they liked it that way at church, and we didn't have a curling iron. But I'll take it out if you don't want it—"

"No, it's fine." And like that, her fingers continued to spin through the freshly washed hair, the tugs gentle, never drawing too hard against Lana's scalp or breaking off stubborn strands. "You did this every Saturday night for all three of your cousins?" Mary Eunice hummed her acknowledgment. "Why?"

"I loved them. I wanted them to feel beautiful—as beautiful as they were in my eyes. I want the same for you." Lana's stomach warmed at the words Mary Eunice offered, so innocent, so lacking any expectation of Lana returning the sentiment. "Aunt Celest told me once that I was paying my debt to her by keeping everyone in line and cared for, but I never saw it that way."

Lana's tongue touched the sensitive spot on the inside of her cheek before she ventured, "I take it that your Aunt Celest wasn't an incredibly nice woman." She looked up to Mary Eunice, wondering if she had presumed too much, and Mary Eunice began to worry her lower lip like she did when she felt exposed.

"We all have our burdens. Aunt Celest had more than most." She tied the end of the braid in Lana's hair and smoothed a hand over the top of her head. "I asked her, once, when she came home late and she had a bloody nose, why she had stayed out so late. I was nine, then—Carol was three, Patricia not yet two, James only a few months old. She told me that she was looking for love, and she had found it in a bad place." Her lips quirked at the corners. "I didn't understand. I asked her why she would look for love when we already loved her so much. She took the baby from me and told me to take the others to bed. I don't think she knew the answer any better than I did."

"She was a prostitute?" Lana guessed, trying not to hate herself for prying; each window Mary Eunice offered her into the past intrigued her, gave her another glimpse inside the woman in front of her, who offered such kindness and love without expectation for recompense.

"She was many things, whatever paid. Sometimes she had a day job. Sometimes she didn't. She kept our bellies full. We always had a roof over our heads and a safe place to lie down." Mary Eunice's speech broke off, and she continued, more carefully, "I struggle to fault her anything, knowing how much worse I would have been without her."

Lana nodded, considering. "I understand." I don't understand how, after all that, you still have a soft spirit. I don't understand how you are not hard and unforgiving as stone. Mary Eunice took her hand and helped her stand again, the touch of her skin tender. "Thank you, Sister."

When she lay down in bed, she felt much cleaner than before; the fresh sheets smelled like fabric softener, and while her body ached and her head throbbed, peace smothered her in a cool embrace. Mary Eunice bustled about a little longer, and Lana waited for her to come to bed before she reclined into the pillows on her back. She couldn't lie on her tender abdomen. Mary Eunice had a journal in one hand, and she sat up with her legs crossed, one hand teasing the front cover where the book rested on her knee. "Does the light bother you?"

"No." Lana peered at her, at the hesitance written on her face, the uncertainty where she plucked her lower lip between her teeth, the anxious trembling of her hands. "What is that?" The book had given Mary Eunice goosebumps on her arms. "Sister?"

She licked her lips. "It's—It's my prayer journal." The whisper tickled the air, like she feared the sound of her voice would violate the air. "I haven't opened it since..." Lana filled in the blank without Mary Eunice straining herself. The nun traced the wrinkled leather cover. "I'm surprised
it's still in one piece. I thought it would have been destroyed."

Back teeth again pinching into the soft of her inner cheek, Lana watched Mary Eunice weigh the journal in her hands. "You think you might have written in it while you were…?" The word possessed burned both of them, so neither of them spoke it aloud when it was not necessary. As she spoke, Mary Eunice nodded, slow and numb. "You won't know unless you look." The provided advice seemed obvious enough, but she knew it wasn't the guidance Mary Eunice sought from her. "Do you want me to do it for you?"

Shaking her head, Mary Eunice banished the suggestion. "No, I—I have to do it." She looked at Lana through the corner of her eyes, gathering her courage by gazing at the friendly face and the strength it provided.

Then, she lifted the cover and examined the first page; a large letter F, scrawled in thick ink, covered the elegant handwriting on the lines below. Mary Eunice covered her mouth with a hand. Lana pushed herself upright, grunting at the pain in her gut as she shuffled closer, letting their shoulders touch; she peered at the nasty blotted letter, and then the next as Mary Eunice turned the page—a chunky U. Each page bore a letter covering all of the prayers and thoughts that Mary Eunice had written.

The message became clearer with each turn of the page. As they deepened in the book, a few tears fell into Mary Eunice's lap, blurring the nasty inked letters, but even that could not leave them unrecognizable. At the end, Lana worked through the letters in her head, the disgusting message they had crafted: "FUCK YOU THERE IS NO FUCKING GOD YOU PATHETIC SLUT."

Lana closed the book on the final T and pried it away from Mary Eunice, who whimpered a protest between her tears. "You don't need to look at that." She dropped the journal on the nightstand and gathered the covers up around them into a bundle, one arm twisting through Mary Eunice's. "You don't need to see that," she repeated, and Mary Eunice crumbled at the warmth of her embrace, buckling into Lana, slow and gentle but still needy. Lana closed her eyes at the sensation of sticky breath exhaling against the wet places on her neck. "I'll burn it," she whispered, lifting one hand to Mary Eunice's cheek; she used the fat of her thumb to dash away some of the tears. "We'll take it to the backyard and watch it go up in flames."

Mary Eunice didn't cry long, nor very hard, too exhausted to wring more emotion from her wearied body. Her watery blue eyes remained fixed upon Lana after she quieted. "Am I hurting you?" she whispered, head resting upon Lana's shoulder with a feather-light weight.

Lana's lips curled upward at the corners, and she secured an arm around Mary Eunice's shoulders, keeping her held close. "No. I'm not made of glass." She smoothed her hand over the plains of Mary Eunice's back. How long had they both lived, starved for touch, craving affection? Lana had lain in this same bed with Wendy, but she and Mary Eunice never calculated their gestures in the ways Wendy had preferred, living in fear of discovery.

"I love touching you," Mary Eunice admitted, eyelids drowsing. "You make me feel safe." As she closed her eyes, she continued, "I can't remember the last time I hugged someone, before you. It was a long time ago." Lana took one of Mary Eunice's hands and squeezed it. "I know it is indulgent, but you give me strength."

"There's nothing sinful about wanting contact, Sister. You're human. You deserve to feel wanted." Mary Eunice smiled up at Lana, all sleepy and satisfied. Lana held her until her breaths leveled out in sleep, when she pressed a delicate kiss to the crown of Mary Eunice's head. The sensation left her heart flopping about like a fish in her chest, so wrong but so right at the same time. Don't do it. You can't have her. Lana tucked one golden strand of hair behind an ear and let Mary Eunice's
head fall onto the pillow. But, god, if she isn't beautiful.

Lana fought to gain some rest, some reprieve, but in spite of all of her tiredness, the pinching pain in her gut kept her in the waking world. She blinked up at the ceiling as it gradually hazed from off-white to an ugly gray, the roof of a basement. Bloody Face hovered above her, popping the buttons off of her blouse with his scalpel, ripping it off. "You're trying not to scream."

He worked with a meticulous apathy. "But you will." Underneath, she wore the same lace bra that she'd worn to Briarcliff, when they took her. He studied it with his dark eyes gleaming behind the mask, all lustful and loathsome. "They always do when I make the first incision." She couldn't restrain her tears because he knew everything, he read her posture like he read her mind, he watched her trembling lips and twitching chin and knew she had to fight to keep from showing him all the bees rattling around inside her chest. "But then shock will take over, and you won't feel anything."

Was that supposed to be comforting? That she would know some numbness before her death? Her belly squelched, and if she had anything inside it, she would have vomited, but she hadn't eaten since she came here. His scalpel pressed to the base of her throat, and for one sweltering moment, she closed her eyes and waited for the end, embraced the gathering pool of blood and sweat in the hollow of her throat. But her urge to survive took over, and her tongue danced—she thought she was babbling, but Bloody Face looked at her through his mask like she meant something to him, and she kept talking.

Maybe she could escape from this nightmare, from Bloody Face, from Briarcliff, and go home. But what waited for her at home? Not Wendy. Wendy, god, Wendy—Wendy—she chanted the name like a mantra in her mind while Thredson spoke back to her, something softening in him. "I do, I do understand," she stammered. She remembered the picture he had brought her, Wendy mostly nude, smoking a cigarette; Lana embraced the image.

"No—you don't." He ripped her blouse open wide and toyed with the lacy bra underneath, the scalpel resting against one of the straps. The stringy hair from his mask tickled when he leaned over her.

Is that Wendy's, too? Hers had a different color—but decomposition could alter so much—decomposition. Wendy. "That's alright, O-Oliver." The name burned on her tongue. Language tantalized her, and perhaps it could save her, her suave journalist's tongue sparing her a violent death. Or maybe it will prolong the pain. "I don't want you to feel guilty." He snapped her bra strap, and she ushered her words faster, faster, hoping she could free herself before he freed her soul. "A mother's love is unconditional."

He paused, tilting his head. I got his attention. The tears squeezed out of the corners of her eyes. "You never had that, did you? Everyone deserves that." Her trembling lips added a stammer, a lisp, to her voice, and she couldn't quell the shaking of her head, the part saying, No, no, no, while the dominating part encouraged, Lie, lie, lie. "Even you—" Her mouth worked at the open air for the last word, the finishing touch. "Baby."

He stripped the mask off of his face and dropped it onto the bed beside her. It touched her bound arm. She cringed. Round tears rolled down Thredson's cheeks as he wept, crippled at having finally experienced some validation. He pinched his hand over his nose, fighting himself, and Lana pushed herself further. "My baby..."

Biting his fist, he looked to her, and her pulse raced while she awaited his verdict, his deep brown eyes all things vulnerable and childish; anyone who saw him like this would not guess all that he had done. What he did to Wendy. She swallowed the thickness in the back of her throat. "Baby needs colostrum."
The teeth pierced the soft flesh of her breast; Lana threw her head back and sobbed, choking out her cries as he mercilessly descended upon her exposure. No man had ever touched her before. He made her tongue twist into the roof of her mouth, strangling through another scream, hands drawing into agonized fists.

Someone grabbed her by the shoulders, and she shrieked, dry and weak. "Lana—"

Sweat drenched her from head to toe. She kicked the blankets off of her body and lashed upward, toward the woman's silhouette; her hand struck something in a blind flail. The wound on her stomach burned. Gnarling against the nightmare, her lips curled. She could still smell him, his manly reek, all sweaty and grotesque and hard. The hands combing over her now had none of his hardness. "Wendy?" she panted, almost inaudible, to the cool air. No, it's not, she's dead. She floundered to reach the bedside lamp, but the stretching pulled her incision.

Mary Eunice moved over her and turned it on. "It's just me," she murmured, sleepy-eyed, yellow hair tossed into lumps of bed-head. A drop of blood dribbled from the corner of her busted lip. I hit her. The realization sent her heart plummeting down into the pit of her stomach. "It's okay." Her hands returned to Lana's body, more hesitant than before, but determined to help, insistent on their quest. "Sit up."

The supportive arms around her waist guided her upward and hugged her. Lana's face crumpled, and she turned into the embrace, arms wreathing around Mary Eunice in response. She found solace in the modest softness of Mary Eunice's chest. "I—I'm s-sorry," she stammered in between her gasping breaths. Each shaking rasp made her abdomen sting. She hissed at the pain and rolled up tighter. "Sister, I—I didn't mean—"

"I know." Mary Eunice shushed her. "Did you hurt yourself?" Lana held Mary Eunice by the elbows, grip tightening. Her lips shuddered and whimpered around words, unable to form them. When she closed her eyes, Bloody Face loomed over her again, and a sob rolled upward from her heaving stomach. She wrenched her eyes open, fought the urge to blink, and it made her tears form more quickly. Mary Eunice touched a hand to her cheek, cool and comforting; Lana's skin crawled with a festering heat, her body swollen with distress. "Let me know when you're okay." Those pale eyes gleamed with a steady concern.

Lana lay against her, focused upon her face, afraid to blink, afraid to sleep, afraid to speak. In the silence, her fear curdled into hot, anxious shivers buried beneath the fleece gown, sweat slickening her palms and thighs. She leaned against Mary Eunice, ear pressed to her collarbone. Violent tears ripped from her. Each time she thought she had managed to quiet the urge, it rose again, her toes curling and legs hiking up as much as they could without straining her incision. Mary Eunice kept her folded into safety, ear to the protruding collarbone, and hummed. The sound was strange, rolling through the flesh and bone against the heartbeat. She fought herself to listen with rapt attention to the lull of song contradicting pulse.

As she listened, she recognized the melody, but her tongue refused to rasp along; once Mary Eunice had quieted, Lana closed her eyes. "Thank you."

The silence resumed. "Are you okay?" Lana nodded, all stiff, uncertain. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"I—" Her voice cracked, and she swallowed the weakness like a bitter medicine. "I don't know." She had cried enough for a lifetime. Each breath wavered as she gathered and released it, in and out through her mouth; her nose was clogged with snot.

Mary Eunice took the hem of her gown. "Let me see." Her low voice hadn't lost its composure, even as she sucked on the wound on the corner of her mouth, relieving it of the few droplets of
blood gathering there. Lana rolled up her skirt. She grimaced as she revealed the flab of her belly covered by a thick white bandage. She felt so skeletal, so unattractive. "I'm going to get some scissors." Mary Eunice spoke to her with a slow honesty. "I need to make sure you didn't hurt yourself. I'll be right back."

A keening developed in the back of Lana's throat, and she fought to stifle it. "O—Okay." She swallowed the thickness in her throat, and with it, her plea for Mary Eunice to stay just a little longer. She followed the retreating figure with her eyes, determined not to lose the shadow. She's just over there, Lana soothed herself, listening to the things rattle around in the bathroom. She'll be right back. "Sister?"

"Yes?"

Lana's hand drew into a fist in the blankets, and she licked her lips, dry and raw before her. She didn't know what to say. I just wanted to hear your voice. But Mary Eunice returned to her, carrying the scissors, the roll of bandages, and a bowl of soap and water with a washcloth. Lana tensed when one hand brushed against the soft of her gut. Mary Eunice looked up at Lana. "Is that tender?"

"No, I—I'm fine." She braced herself when Mary Eunice touched her again, and this time, she didn't allow herself to flinch at the sheer deference Mary Eunice granted her body.

As she took the scissors, the blade curved against Lana's skin, Mary Eunice told her, "Hold still. I don't want to cut you." The metal was cold, and she bit her tongue when she remembered the slicing chill of Bloody Face's scalpel against her throat. She choked on a wheeze. "Lana?" The scissors left her skin, and instead, Mary Eunice took her hand, fingers rolling to measure the rapid beat of Lana's pulse through her wrist. "Breathe. I won't hurt you. You're safe here with me."

"I know," she croaked. She leaned her head back and tried to think of something else, anything else. Eyes slits, she watched Mary Eunice's chest, its rhythmical rise-fall, a tad faster than normal as the nun worried over her. Her breasts rose with each breath, and as Lana grounded herself in reality, they held more allure. "I'm sorry." With their hands clasped together, she could feel the slight sweat coming off of Mary Eunice's palm, a condolence. "I didn't mean to hit you. I—I didn't know where I was—"

"It didn't hurt as much as you think it did." Mary Eunice rubbed the back of Lana's hand with her thumb. "I'm more concerned about you right now."

"You're always concerned about me. It's bullshit. When do you worry about yourself?"

Mary Eunice grinned, ducking her head in embarrassment at the sharp words. Her tangled hair, messy and tousled but attractive, bounced while she replied, "I take it you feel a little better now." She studied Lana, scanning for some encouragement. "Can I cut this off of you?" Lana sucked the raw spot on the inside of her cheek, nodding and withdrawing in the same swoop. "Don't move. I'm right here."

The pads of her fingers made Lana tense again as she braced herself for some impact, but Mary Eunice spoke to her, gentle and low. The sound of her voice kept Lana grounded in the present. "'Have I not commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.'" She cut through the bandage, smooth in the movement.

As she peeled back the cloth, Lana mumbled, "Whithersoever. That's a million dollar word." She swallowed hard, peering down at the red lips of her surgical wound, now held together by sutures. "That's going to be a pretty big scar," she muttered.
"Mine's in about the same place." Mary Eunice dabbed the warm, soapy water out of the bowl and wrung out the washcloth. "This might sting a little." She dabbed at the incision to clean it; it smarted, but Lana didn't offer a complaint, too busy sulking on the notion of having burned Mary Eunice, having left a scar upon her body, a mark upon her perfect, pure, pale skin.

She dabbed the wound dry with a clean towel and smeared a generous amount of petroleum jelly over it when her forefinger, and then she began to wrap it again with a fresh bandage. "Thank you, Sister." She wiped her drying cheek with the back of one hand. As Mary Eunice disposed of the old bandage and the accumulation of things, Lana scanned the room, steadying herself, plucking herself from the dream whenever it tried to consume her once again.

Mary Eunice returned to the bed soon and folded herself under the blankets, head resting on her pillow, looking up at Lana, who hadn't lain down yet. "Lana?" She peeked out from under the covers like a turtle, drawn all the way up to her face so that only a few strands of yellow hair and her blue eyes remained visible. "Do you want to talk about it? The dream?"

It flashed before her—his teeth on her breast, not just suckling but furiously drawing blood from the tender flesh like milk—and her muscles went taut, breath hitching. "I—I can't." She gulped and pinched the bridge of her nose to ground herself. Then, slow, she sank into the covers, allowing Mary Eunice to tug them up around her. "Is it okay if I leave the light on?"

"Sure."

In the dim, yellow lamplight, Lana kept her gaze fixed on Mary Eunice's face. If she closed her eyes, he would come back; he had etched himself into the back of her eyelids. "What do you do," she whispered, "when you can't stop remembering?"

Pursing her lips, Mary Eunice murmured, "I pray." She reached under the covers to take one of Lana's hands, worked it between her fingers. "It helps me to reflect and ask for strength. But I would guess you don't want to try that." The corners of Lana's lips plucked upward. "When I pray and I don't feel better, I talk to you. You make it feel better. You always know what to say."

Lana shuffled nearer to her under the covers. Mary Eunice needed no encouragement to slide close. Lana inhaled her scent, smooth and natural, like the rain. "I—I can't forget what he felt like. What he smelled like. What he tasted like." She shivered, her other hand covering her breast where it stung. She never looked at it for too long in the mirror, afraid his teeth had scarred her, that she would carry his unique dental imprint upon her body for the rest of her life. "It still hurts where he touched me."

"Oh, Lana..." She recognized the tone, the note of sheer helplessness attached to it. "You don't deserve to hurt anywhere." Mary Eunice's wet lips, slim in their pucker, pressed to her cheek, delicate and sweet; Lana's eyes fluttered closed to embrace the sensation. "I want to make it better," she whispered, breath hot on Lana's cheek.

Her hand on Lana's offered so much comfort, and Lana couldn't help herself in wondering how those gentle hands would feel elsewhere upon her body—on her chest, around her waist, between her thighs. You're hard-up. She is untouchable. You cannot have her.

"You never told me about that dream you said you had," she murmured, hoping to change the subject.

A quiet, low chuckle floated from Mary Eunice. "Oh, it was silly." A slight pink tint rose to her cheeks. "I dreamed that we had a baby. It was really late, and she was hungry. You were mixing the milk in the kitchen while I held her." Her eyelashes fluttered, brow scrunching as she thought. "Her name was Eleanor. She had hair like mine and—and your eyes." Mary Eunice smiled. "I told you it was silly."
"Did we call her Ellie or Nora?" Lana mused aloud. She turned her head, their noses almost touching.

"Ellie."

"Good. I like Ellie more." She entertained the idea for a moment, a foreign concept brought forth by an innocent mind. In spite of herself, she smiled. "Goodnight, Sister."

"Goodnight." Lana settled in preparation to sleep, eyes closed, but whenever she saw Thredson behind her eyelids, she opened them again, and each time, she found Mary Eunice still gazing back at her, wide awake, ready to provide aid if she had another dream. She's guarding me, Lana acknowledged, and if she hadn't been so physically and emotionally exhausted, she would have confronted the nun, told her that it wasn't her duty to play guard dog and that she needed to sleep. But as it was, when Lana finally slipped into another slice of shredded peace, she was grateful for the guardian angel waiting at her side.

…

"Lana," Mary Eunice pled, "are you sure that you don't want to wait one more day? I think you should listen to the doctor…" You're whining, and she's not listening. She plucked her lip between her front teeth. It had scabbed over, raw and chapped, from the amount of times she had gnawed on it since Lana had gone into the hospital. She ran her tongue over the small wound and pinched herself in the forearm, a distraction. The lip-biting had erupted in an attempt to stop chewing her nails, and now she had a ridged mark on her arm from pinching, trying to stop biting her lips. You're a walking nervous tic, Mary, Aunt Celest scolded her, voice clear in her mind.

"The doctor said I should rest until I felt better. I feel fine." But Lana's face had the tight wrinkles of pain around her eyes, a downward turn to her mouth, and she had begun to eat Tylenol like candy. Mary Eunice stared down at her toes, afraid to confront Lana, uncomfortable with her flagrant lies. Lana detested demonstrating her weakness, letting anyone see her vulnerabilities, and Mary Eunice knew that she would inevitably lose any confrontation—Lana was more stubborn than a dog with a bone between its front paws.

The light of Tuesday morning filtered through the living room, the sunlight bright but the day chilly enough for the house's heating system to have kicked on. October arrived with a vengeance, all golden and pigmented in the front yard and scattering dry leaves down the street. "We have to go to the grocery store. We have nothing to eat."

"I can't dispute that," Mary Eunice mumbled. Even to Mary Eunice, who had grown in poverty, Lana's kitchen was strikingly bare; they had used the last of the bread, noodles, milk, eggs, and almost everything in the cans. She had used the last of their grits for breakfast, watering them down so much that Lana, in spite of her strong stomach, grimaced as she ate them. "But are you sure? I could always walk."

"No." The stubborn look wavered for a moment, and Mary Eunice wondered if she had made some headway, but a shadow of something resembling fear crossed Lana's face. "It's not safe." Her teeth returned to her lip, uncertain how to respond, and then she pinched herself in the arm to keep from opening the scab again. "You wouldn't be able to carry all of it, anyway." Lana had managed to dress herself without any aid, but she wore loose sweatpants, and in spite of the chilly weather, she wore flip-flops. "C'mon, let's go. It's going to get busier after lunch."

Mary Eunice ducked after her out the front door and waited for Lana to lock it, shuffling after her in a series of crooked steps; Lana walked like a cripple, pained from the her surgery. "The doctor said you shouldn't drive," she reminded Lana from the corner of her mouth, like an admission, something she didn't actually intend to say aloud.
"I'm not supposed to drive while I'm on the medication. I'm not on the medication." Lana shot her a look out of the corner of her eye. "What's the matter with you? You're concerned—more than normal, which is alarming, given your usual level of concern would give an ordinary person an aneurysm." Mary Eunice pinched herself in the arm again, and Lana swatted her hand away. "Stop that. You're bleeding."

She bit her tongue, snatching away when the wound, pinched into her skin by her own short, jagged fingernails, oozed. "I—I just have a bad feeling." The foreboding tickled her insides with anxiety, driving her nervous habits in some attempt to distract herself from its darkness. Lana's eyebrows drew together, and her brown eyes scanned Mary Eunice, considering, thinking; she continued, "It's probably nothing… You haven't left the house since you got here except to go to that abortion doctor and then the hospital. You're afraid of the real world, Mary Eunice. She swallowed hard. Public life had never treated her kindly, but she hadn't appeared to the real world for a decade, since it made her flounder naked and freezing and laughed at her.

The tight corners of Lana's lips tilted upward. "We're going to the grocery store," she reminded Mary Eunice. "Unless you're worried they've run out of milk," she teased as an afterthought, "in which case, it would truly be a tragic day." She cranked the car and the motor hummed. As Mary Eunice tensed, Lana paused, studying her once more. "It's okay," she assured, and her voice lost its humorous appeal, serious and holding her gaze with gravity. "Are you?"

She nodded, stiff but certain. "I'm with you," she whispered. "I trust you." The anxious swell of her gut hummed down like bees in a hive as Lana backed out onto the road. They drove in silence, and she shadowed Lana in the parking lot, watching the people mingle.

Lana locked the car; she donned a pair of sunglasses and tucked her hair into a hat as they entered the store. The chill bit Mary Eunice through her sweater. She looked at Lana's bare toes. "I should've offered to help her with her shoes. Lana didn't like to ask for help.

A small child dashed out of one of the aisles and charged at them with a toy airplane in his hand, and a girl pursued, pigtails bouncing. "I'm going to get you, Tony!" They wreathed between Mary Eunice and Lana and vaulted past a crate of tomatoes. Their mother followed them, carrying a basket of canned goods. "Excuse me, I'm terribly sorry," she said as she passed, and then she trotted after the children. "Shirley! Anthony! Get back here! Your father isn't going to be happy!"

Mary Eunice shrank, trying to stay small, out of sight, out of the way, but Lana walked, unperturbed, through the aisles; she leaned on her shopping cart for support. Mary Eunice scuffled after her, feeling quite like a child again, tiptoeing after Aunt Celest in the supermarket, quietly clinging to the hem of her skirt so the crowd wouldn't consume her. A voice echoed through the building—"Todd, we need you at check-out"—and she flinched, a hiccup of surprise erupting from her throat.

"Relax." Lana dropped a couple cans into the shopping cart. "How long has it been since you last went shopping?" She checked off her storelist with a pen, musing on the next item.

"Sister Jude had Sister Charity take me to the pharmacy a few years ago," Mary Eunice hedged. Through the fabric of her sweater, she pinched her forearm again, and Lana brushed her hand away. "Sorry. I'm a little nervous."

"I can tell." Lana took several bags of pasta and dry beans. Once she came to a sack of potatoes, Mary Eunice scrambled to take it from her before she lifted it. "Thanks." Lana slashed at the paper. Goosebumps appeared on her exposed arms.
They made their way through the shop, Mary Eunice shrinking behind Lana whenever someone drew too near; several times, she bumped into her from behind or stepped on the back of her heels, leading to a mumbled apology and Lana waving her off, shooting her a withering look. Mary Eunice picked up all of the heavy things, the gallons of milk, and handled the dozen of eggs after Lana dropped and busted a can of peas.

At the last aisle, Lana pursed her lips, scanning the available junk food—snack cakes, potato chips, crackers, cake mix, various candies and chocolates. "I don't suppose you'll give me any feedback on the types of junk food to keep in the house."

Mary Eunice shrugged. "Molly always liked the powdered sugar marshmallow puffs." She closed her eyes for a moment, reminiscing. Mary Eunice had bought her a twin pack of marshmallow puffs once a week, each Friday. She had never indulged in them herself—she didn't like the texture and preferred a long-lasting sugar candy or a stick of gum—but Molly lit up with delight when she ate them.

"You're right, those are really good." Lana stopped and scanned the shelves for them, stopping at the top shelf, beyond her reach, where she spotted a box of the marshmallow puffs. "Can you reach those? You're taller."

Thrusting herself onto the tips of her toes, Mary Eunice strained for the box, and she caught it with her fingertips. In the gap between the shelves, she spotted the lean figure of a tall man. Her heart fluttered as he faced her, but he didn't spot her, looking down at his own store list. "Sister?" Lana's voice plucked her back, and she lay a hand on Mary Eunice's elbow.

"It's Dr. Arden." A breathlessness, an emptiness, filled her chest cavity, and she fought to continue breathing. "I don't want him to see me." Hot blush rushed to her cheeks as she remembered the way she had propositioned him on the night of the storm, but the moment the heat filled her, so did the chill. What had become of his human experiments? Her belly flipped.

Lana peered through the shelves, verifying what she had said. "Has he ever seen you without your habit?"

"Er—sort of—" Lana's brow quirked. "I might have—taken off my clothes—in front of him—at some point—" The tips of her ears burned a fury, and ashamed tears tickled behind her eyes. *Stupid stupid stupid!* She stared down at the tile floor of the grocery store, wishing she could melt at the admission.

A sympathetic smile curled upon Lana's lips, and she took off her sunglasses, pushing them onto Mary Eunice's face. She blinked into the tinted lenses, the brown world which accompanied them. "You can't say anything that would shock me, at this point." She squashed her hat on top of Mary Eunice's head and reached into her purse. "Pucker up, buttercup." She proffered a stick of dark lipstick, and as Mary Eunice pursed her twitching lips, Lana drew a mouth on her. "There. Now he definitely won't recognize you."

The stickiness of the glossy lipstick felt foreign and greasy. *What color is it? How stupid do I look?* Both questions curdled the childishness within her, so she didn't answer them. "Are you sure?" she whispered instead.

"Just about. Come on."

There were two check-outs, and Lana chose the one opposite Dr. Arden. They both kept their backs to him. Mary Eunice twirled her hair around her finger. The woman ahead of them had a lot of groceries and chatted amicably with the cashier, but Mary Eunice didn't hear that conversation, too busy listening to the one behind her. "Find everything alright, sir?"
"Yes, thank you." He sounded gravelly, distracted. The young woman rang up his items. "That's a terribly unbecoming habit, gum chewing. The same as smoking, drinking, and swearing."

"Yessir," grated the young woman in return, and she didn't smack her gum again.

At the same time that Dr. Arden left, Lana moved up in line, and the cashier rang up their items. Lana gave her a tissue to wipe the lipstick off of her face. She glanced over her shoulder to ensure that he had gone, and then she took off the sunglasses and the hat. "Thank you."

The cashier straightened as he looked at her. "Mary?" The address, her given name, made her snatch her head in surprise. "Mary Eunice McKee? Jesus H. Christ, if it ain't been a long time."

She lifted her eyes to his face, older but bearing the same cocky smile, thick brows, glossy hair. A cold stone dropped into the pit of her stomach. "Hi, Todd." The meekness in her voice made her shrink, a self-fulfilling prophecy of weakness; Lana, like a dog guarding a pack member, flanked her and straightened her back. Still, it could not prevent the image of the last time she had seen Todd from floating to her mind. He wore a camera around his neck, the bulb flashing each time he pressed the button, blinding her. She gulped.

Todd paid no heed to either of them. "We thought you were dead," he rambled, like he spoke of the weather. "I mean—since you never came back to school—Cheryl swore you'd gone and offed yourself—she was heartsick—" He chuckled, shaking his head. "Of course, we chased Molly down, but she wouldn't tell us anything. All over that dumb prank." She closed her eyes and wilted like a flower deprived of water, lowering her head, blush rising to her cheeks. Of course he had to bring it up…

"And it was really stupid. I'm sorry." His smile hadn't broken.

Lana fumed beside her. "You don't look very sorry, Todd."

She spat the name, and he looked at her, somewhat incredulous. "Lana—haven't seen you at Pat Joe's in awhile." His voice hushed at the mention of the bar; he glanced over his shoulder to ensure that no one listened to him. "Well—I mean, it was a long time ago. We were young jerks. Kids will be kids." Todd fidgeted under her furious gaze.

Mary Eunice tasted Lana's bitterness in the air, and she rested a hand on Lana's forearm, muttering, "It's okay…" Please, don't make it any worse.

To her surprise, the intrepid journalist quieted, an acquiescence, and Mary Eunice bit back a relieved sigh as she delivered, "Of course," and began to load the shopping cart with her items. Lana paid for everything, gaze still icy and jaw set with a marked unfriendliness; Todd didn't try to speak to them again, cheeks pink. Mary Eunice sucked in a deep breath once they were outside the grocery store and she could taste the cold air, sky gray and heavy with coming rain.

In silence, they loaded the trunk of the car. Lana seethed, and Mary Eunice scrambled to take all of the heavy items out of the cart before Lana could try to lift them in her fury. It's okay, she wanted to say, you don't have to be mad at him because of me, but she knew those words would set Lana off, send her into a tirade of, It's not okay, and accompanying expletives.

"You know what?" Lana cut into her thoughts. "Fuck that guy. Fuck him up the ass with rusty nails and and glass." Mary Eunice cringed at the prospect, tears burning behind her eyes. "Right, sorry, that was graphic. But seriously? Fuck him." She slid into the car and stared down at the floorboards, arms crossed, and Lana sat beside her. She didn't put the keys in the ignition, instead reaching to touched Mary Eunice's knee; the touch softened all of Lana's fury, the wrinkles of pain returning around the corner of her mouth, eyes gentle and probing. "I'm sorry. Are you okay?"
Mary Eunice bobbed her head, not looking up, hoping to hide the tear on her cheek. Lana wasn't fooled and took her chin, turning her head. "Hey." She brushed the tear away with her knuckle. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

*Stupid, pathetic—stop crying—it was ten years ago.* Sniffling, she swallowed the thickness in the back of her throat. "I'm fine," she whispered. "It was a long time ago." But his eyes still stripped her bare, made her feel nude and vulnerable. She couldn't make eye contact with Lana as she lied.

"Right." Lana's tone indicated that Mary Eunice hadn't managed to convince her. She studied Mary Eunice a moment longer before she cranked the car and pulled out of the parking lot. Mary Eunice sank into her own thoughts. *She's awfully quiet.* She looked at Lana from the corner of her eye. *She normally has some advice. She always knows what to say.*

Lana turned left at the stop sign. "This isn't the way home," Mary Eunice whispered, brow quirking.

Snorting, Lana inclined her eyebrows. "We're not going home." A hard expression came over her face, stern and furious. *She's got something up her sleeve. She's planning something.* Dread collected in her chest like rainwater in a bucket, and she pinched herself in the arm again. "I know where Todd lives." Her mouth was set in a thin line. "And I think revenge is a dish best served with a side of eggs."

Chapter End Notes

Happy holidays!
"Lana, I really don't think…" Mary Eunice grappled for her words, trying to keep her voice from shaking with distress. *What does that even mean? With a side of eggs?* "Whatever you think—it just doesn't seem—I think—" Lana hadn't stopped the car yet. Mary Eunice bit the inside of her cheek to work through her thoughts and cease her idiotic stammering. "Why?"

"Because he hurt you." Lana scowled. She accelerated down the road, too fast for Mary Eunice's tastes; she gripped the handle on the door. "And he's not going to get away with it. People pay for it when they fuck with people I love."

The mingled affection and fear in Mary Eunice's chest strangled her from speaking. *I love you, too, but couldn't we just go home?* Her lips trembled, and she coughed, awkward, nervous. "I believe in forgive and forget," she mumbled, eyes downcast. "And the golden rule."

"Forgive and forget works fine if you had forgotten it. You haven't. You can't talk about it without crying." Mary Eunice hung her head, picking at the soft scab on her forearm, opening it up again. "And the golden rule would be applicable if I planned to drown him in a swimming pool. It's merely unfortunate that I don't have one at my disposal."

*That's not how the golden rule works.* Lana swatted her hand off of her scab-picking, and she stifled the urge by chewing on her nails; her habits had become cyclical, each one building into the next. Once she had loosened a chunk of keratin, she found the courage to ask, "Then what do you plan to do?"

Pulling over in front of a brown painted house, Lana parked the car. "We are going to egg his car." *No, Lana, please. I don't want to go to jail.* "But first, I'm going to investigate. C'mon." And, in spite of all of her complaints and misgivings, all of her instincts telling her she would have been better off swallowing a hot coal, she scrambled after Lana, keeping pace right beside her.

Lana approached the front door of the house and rang the doorbell. "Todd lives with one of my college professors." Her jaw twitched, teeth grinding. Her dark eyes held an intense rage, the fortitude and intrepidity she had used to survive Briarcliff and Bloody Face; the sight of it, knowing that Lana bore it in her defense, exhilarated her. *She's so beautiful. She's profound.* "His parents have more money than they know what to do with. They bought him a Lamborghini last year."

Her mouth gaped at the long, unfamiliar word; it sounded Italian and extravagant, the word itself leaking embellishments, and Lana's furious eyes kept distracting her. "A—A what?"

"A fancy car." The corners of Lana's mouth twitched upward. "A very expensive fancy car, to be precise." Mary Eunice began to frame a protest—*We can't vandalize an expensive car*—but the door swung open before she could collect her thoughts. A short, portly man in his mid-sixties waited in the door frame; he had thick salt and pepper hair, a scruffy gray beard, and heavy
wrinkles framing his hazel eyes. "Earl," Lana greeted.

At the sight of her, his face lit. "Well, if it ain't our local celebrity! Are you out on the manhunt again, or are you ready for another poetry slam? It's been long enough, Lana."

"Manhunt is a strong word." Lana crossed her arms, arching an eyebrow. She stood shorter than Mary Eunice, but her presence swallowed everything like a blackhole, an endless height, a personality that could not be captured in the small body. "But I am here on business."

Earl sighed, heavy, sinking. "Come in, both of you." His eyes landed on Mary Eunice. "What's your name, kid?"

Kid. She licked her dry mouth; her tongue had turned to cotton. "I'm Sister Mary Eunice." The words slurred into a mumble, and she ducked her head, cheeks discoloring in shame. Lana wanted them to vandalize a car while the man was home? There's no way.

In return, he gave a low whistle. "A nun? Are you a convert or something now, Lana?"

"She's my friend." Lana squared up in front of him, standing between him and Mary Eunice with her feet apart; her hands at her sides made tight fists, her teeth bared, like a lioness defending her territory. Am I her territory? The thought struck Mary Eunice and rang through her mind like a bell. Lana, in all of her ferocity, had claimed Mary Eunice. Her belly warmed inside, soft at the prospect of someone caring so much, and a dim smile touched her lips. "And she's the reason we're here. We've got a bone to pick with Todd."

The jolly smile dropped from Earl's friendly face, perturbed, heavy brows drawing together in concern. "Todd? He's not very bright, but he's harmless."

"I don't buy it." Lana pushed out her lower lip. "I believe he's got something of Sister Mary Eunice's that was stolen. I intend to return it to her." Earl narrowed his eyes, but before he could respond, Lana pressed, "I just want to look through his shit to see if he still has it. If he doesn't, we'll be out of your hair." Earl hesitated, retreating into himself as he crossed his arms, considering. "It's your house, Earl. You and I both know that Todd isn't paying rent. He's never paid a bill in his life."

"I'm not with Todd because of the money."

"You're with him because he has a tight ass," Lana challenged, eyes smoldering with fury, and Earl quieted, unable to refute her point. "Five, maybe ten minutes in his room. That's all I want." His wrinkled lips flattened into a line, and he opened one arm, a gesture down the hall. "Thanks."

Lana grabbed Mary Eunice by the elbow and dragged her down the hallway to the first door on the left.

The room itself was modest in size and color, but Todd had filled it with luxury, a king-size bed nearly wall to wall and coated with silk pillows and blankets. It had a lace drape around the pillows and a tall, patterned headboard and footboard. A large white vanity rested opposite the bed with a tall chest of drawers beside it. "Christ, this guy thinks he's a fucking king. Check the nightstand—lewd photography, vulgar magazines, letters to people who aren't his mother. Earl will let us have our way with the car once we can prove Todd's not as gay as he says he is." Lana dropped down to the bottom of the chest of drawers and opened it, flipping around through the neatly folded underwear; she had, apparently, forgotten the pain of her surgery in favor of snooping.

Mary Eunice sucked the scabby place on her lower lip. "Do we really… I mean, is it that important? We could just—not." It felt like an intrusion, standing here in this room while Todd
was at work, and while Lana had no qualms against seeing some man’s skid-marked boxers for the sake of research, the thought of combing her hands through someone’s clothing quelled her nerves into a bundle of grasshoppers, springing around. Each item her eyes grazed brought his arrogant face to mind, grinning behind the flashing bulb of a camera, exposing her—Stop, she chided herself. You’ll make yourself start crying again.

Lana looked up at her. "It's important to me," she said after a moment’s pause. "He hurt you. And if he hurt you, he’s hurt other people, and he’ll keep doing it. People don't change."

But they can, Mary Eunice wanted to plea. They can change. Even as she thought it, she tasted the falsehood of it under her tongue, and she knew that Lana would not buy it, so she slunk over to the nightstand and crouched down, opening the bottom drawer. A tube of petroleum jelly was first, and she put that on top of the stand. Underneath, several plastic and rubber phalluses rolled about in a series of jangling noises. "Oh, gross." She intended to withhold the mutter, but the sex toys were a foreign concept to her, so her disgust mingled with ignorant, confused interest. "What is this? Is it—like—art?" She held one of them up so Lana could see.

Lana looked back over her shoulder and cringed, baring her teeth. "Nasty! Put that down!"

At her urgent shout, Mary Eunice dropped the dildo back into the drawer and wiped her hand off on her pants. "What is it?"

"It's a dildo—and don't touch it." Lana blanched. "He's probably got all sorts of diseases crawling on his gross stuff. What else is there?"

"A bunch of those. He's a collector. Big ones and small ones, all colors. Are they expensive?"

"No—I mean, I don't think so. I've never bought one. I never wanted one."

"What are they for?" Mary Eunice's lips pursed, staring down at the jumble of dildos Todd had accumulated in his room for whatever reason. "I don't exactly see the allure in owning a—a bunch of—these things." The word dildo felt vulgar, and she had never said the word penis before in her life, so she hedged around any particular term.

Lana's jaw tightened, and her face reddened in a surprising blush. I don't think I've ever seen her blush before. "Some people like to use them to—to penetrate themselves." Mary Eunice pinched her eyes closed, wishing she hadn't asked. "If they're into that sort of thing."

Her thighs clenched together, sweating, at the prospect of pushing one of those things into her body. She shuddered. Her body ached when she thought of the Monsignor. How was this any different? How could someone enjoy that feeling—being stretched and torn, having that foreign entity pushed into their body? "Doesn't it—hurt?" she stammered; once she said the words, she clamped her jaws together, regretting the question before Lana had even formulated an answer.

Lana, however, had returned to her search through the chest of drawers, flipping through the clothing before she deemed them empty of personal effects and moved on. "Depends who you ask. Barb likes them. She probably has more of them than he does."

I asked you. Mary Eunice pushed her tongue into the roof of her mouth and refused to allow it to move until she was certain that it wouldn’t ask the pressing, prying question. But then the next query struck her and tumbled out. "But—what would a man do with one?"

"Do you really think I'm qualified to tell you about how gay men have sex? That's like asking a blind man to sketch the Mona Lisa." Lana moved to the top of the chest of drawers, looking under
all of the things he had placed atop it. "C'mon, we're running out of time. We've got to find the pictures before Earl changes his mind and throws us out." She tugged out a few folded flannels and shoved her hands into the pockets, emptying them; she found a few cigarettes and old receipts.

"Maybe he got rid of them." Mary Eunice crossed her arms, shrinking in the space, uncertainty clouding her face. "If he doesn't, necessarily, prefer the company of women, then, maybe…"

Lana snorted and dove into the vanity. "This might surprise you, given that you're married to God and everything, but people can actually swing both ways." She opened the drawers and flung out several pairs of socks; beneath them, she found several bags of white powder and syringes. "Watch out for needles."

"What is that?"

"I don't know, but I'm pretty sure it's illegal." Lana opened the last bottom drawer and pulled out a shoebox from within it. "Let's see what Todd keeps in his old shoeboxes." She sank back onto the silk bedspread and flipped the cardboard lid off of it. Then, she gathered a handful of Polaroids, magazines, and envelopes, the stack about two inches thick.

Breath baited, Mary Eunice watched, wide-eyed, stomach sinking lower and lower. Lana's humorous appeal had smeared into a solemn line of her pink lips. She shuffled through the pictures; each photograph captured another soul with large eyes, body exposed. "Christ." Lana pushed the next picture down onto the bed. "How old is that kid? Twelve?" The boy balanced on a diving board, tiny and pale. The back of the picture read, "1949—7th grade. Joey Martin." The following pictures chronicled Joey Martin floundering about in the water, his bare ass glowing as he fled the scene, all skinny and puny.

Lana violated the brief established silence with a whisper. "What fucking monsters." Mary Eunice closed her eyes. Don't cry. You're pathetic. You've cried enough today. You cry too much. Lana's warm fingers closed around her wrist and squeezed. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." When she opened her eyes, she had managed to squelch the tears erupting behind them, and she held it true. She had seen this demon too many times to linger upon it, upon the cruelty of other people—she was well-acquainted with it. It was the kindness that surprised her and crippled her, so undeserved and still so gentle.

Combing through the pictures didn't take much time, as Lana found the ones bearing Mary Eunice's name on the back. She didn't look at them; she passed them to her friend, eyes dark with rage. "We'll burn them," Lana promised. "All of them." Then, she reached for the envelopes and magazines the box had provided. The magazines were self-explanatory, some with naked men, their penises erect and muscles ripped across their chests and stomachs; others had women, all in vulnerable positions, their legs opened and pink folds exposed to the viewer.

In spite of herself, Mary Eunice couldn't rip her eyes from the pictures, the women all looking back at her with their taut breasts and slender hips and pink nether regions. Some of them had thick curls of hair between their legs; others didn't. Their faces all had the same drawn appearance, so fake, lips pursed and slightly parted into a pleading pout. Lana is prettier than all of them. She gulped when the perversion crossed her mind, and she gazed down at the Polaroids of herself, taken ten years ago. Like the other subjects, she was pale and terrified, face blotchy with tears and snot.

Lana, meanwhile, investigated the envelopes. She read some handwritten letters addressed to Todd in loopy, feminine handwriting. Soon, a smirk spread across her face. "Listen to this," she encouraged; Mary Eunice perked up at the address. Lana read aloud, "I miss you. I know you're
busy with Earl, but I hope you are able to leave him soon." She raised her eyebrows. "I want you to be here when the baby is born. My parents are furious that we're married and we aren't living together. Of course, I understand you have very important work to do, but I hope you'll make room for me soon—me and our son. Love, Cheryl." Chuckling, she folded back the first page. "This was written last month. I take it that he hasn't finished his important business with Earl yet, hmm? We'll see how quickly that clears up when Earl finds out about all of this."

Mary Eunice pushed out her lower lip, picking at the spot on her forearm through the sleeve of her sweater. "Maybe we shouldn't—those are his private things—"

"Clearly, he has no respect for anyone's privacy." Lana set her jaw, heavy and dark, enraged. "I promised you if anyone messed with you, I would fuck them up. That is what I intend to do." But I didn't ask you to do that, Mary Eunice plead, unable to phrase the sentence; part of her—a part as dark as Lana's angry, coal-like eyes—wanted to stand back alongside her and watch Todd burn. At her conflicted expression, Lana softened, took a patient breath. "What's the matter?"

"I just—don't think—I'm not sure—" Lana took her hand and pushed it back down to her side to keep her from opening the scab again. Mary Eunice swallowed hard at the tender gesture, and her tongue worked itself into flapping the broken, nervous sentences she tended to form under duress. "It's not really his fault—it wasn't his house—he was just there—and I was stupid enough to show up—if I had just stayed home and watched the kids like Aunt Celest asked—"

Lana struck like a snake, seizing her by the shoulders; Mary Eunice stumbled backward, terrified of Lana's jerking movement, but Lana didn't relent, pinching her hands there. They didn't hurt, but rather had a hot passion to them, startling but not painful. Mary Eunice's lips trembled. You upset her—she's really mad now—stupid stupid stupid. She struggled to form an apology, but Lana cut her off, an index finger pressed to her lips. "Sh, don't talk. Listen to me. Are you listening?"

Bobbing her head, Mary Eunice blinked a number of times, fighting tears. Lana's face was only an inch away from hers. She's shorter than me, Mary Eunice realized dimly. She had always thought of Lana as larger than life, mighty in her courage and nerve; she could not possibly fit into such a petite human frame. And, unlike she had first thought, those eyes weren't maddened, but rather intense and convicted, focused. Lana fixed the powerful gaze upon her, and Mary Eunice's knees melted into rubber. How is she so strong?

"What happened to you is not your fault." Lana spoke slowly, uttering each word with an independent insistence. "You did nothing to deserve this. You did not deserve for this to happen to you." Mary Eunice didn't dare blink, afraid to break the connection tying them together, so intimate. "The people who did this to you are bad people. They were hurting people before they hurt you, and they're still hurting people now." Lana lifted one hand from her shoulder to cup her cheek and wipe away the single falling tear with her thumb. "Do you understand? It's not your fault. This didn't happen because of you. It happened because of them. Do you get it?"

Her paralyzed tongue had lost all sensation, and she dropped her eyes from Lana to the shag carpet under their feet. "I—I—" She wet her lips with her dry tongue. "I made a mistake."

"No, you didn't. Look at me." Mary Eunice obeyed, finding it much harder now, mind filled with shame. She's so beautiful when she's convicted. "You are a marvelous person—No, don't laugh at me, I'm not flattering you, I'm making a point. You are extraordinary because you see people for what they can be instead of what they are. You see the best in everyone, even when their best is pretty goddamn miserable. And it's so damn depressing that you look at everyone around you and see superheroes and look in the mirror and see a maid."

How does she always know? Anguish twisted inside Mary Eunice. Lana told the truth, no matter how much it hurt. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I don't mean to be such a—"
Lana shushed her again with that single finger. "Don't. Don't keep self-deprecating. You're not a burden to me."

"I was going to say nuisance."

"You're not that, either." Lana guided her into an embrace, so tight and fervent that it stole Mary Eunice's breath. She was tentative in securing her arms around Lana in return, worried about jarring her incision, about straining her. "I don't know who ever told you that you were anything less than perfect, but goddamn, if I ever find out, I will fuck them up." Lana's voice tightened when Mary Eunice sniffled. "I'm sorry. Oh, don't cry—I'm sorry."

She wiped her eyes with her fingers, embarrassed. *You're pathetic.* "Why do you talk about me like this?" She had sent a search party out for her voice, but they returned with only a single vocal cord, and it created a rasp. "I'm not—I'm just—" *Stupid* had become her adjective of choice for several years, as Sister Jude tended to apply it to her most often, but she sensed bringing it up now would infuriate Lana. She inhaled deeply. "Thank you."

"I worry about you," Mary Eunice admitted. *You're all I have right now.* She didn't say the words, didn't risk the private investment. They were running out of time, loitering around in a gay man's house with pornographic paraphernalia.

"I know." Lana stuffed the magazines and the letters back into the shoebox where she had found them and gathered it up. "C'mon, let's get out of here—Earl!" Lana called, traipsing through the house, and Mary Eunice scuffled after her, the nude photos stuffed in the back pocket of her jeans. "We found something that might interest you."

The portly man rose from the kitchen table where he had sat with a steaming mug of coffee. "I struggle to entertain your fancies right now," he rumbled. "What did you find? His drug stash? I pretend not to notice as long as he pretends not to use."

"I put that back where I found it." Lana scowled. "No. Here." She thrust the shoebox at him and opened it. "The envelopes contain letters from his wife, Cheryl. They've been together since—since high school?" She looked back to Mary Eunice for confirmation, and she nodded, swallowing the guilt in her throat. In her belly, it burbled. *We're ruining Todd's life.* "In the latest letter, she says some very interesting things about you and about the baby they're expecting. Now, make of the magazines what you will, but these Polaroids each show a victim of a cruel prank that Todd and Cheryl pulled every year on one of their unsuspecting classmates—it starts in 1949—"

"What's the point?" Earl interrupted; his round face had turned pink, veins protruding at the temples. *He's crying.* Mary Eunice's heart wrenched at the sight of him, doubled over at the middle, crumbling a little more with each tidbit that Lana delivered. "What do you want?"

Lana quieted, noticing the same symptoms of grief. She licked her lips, and softly, she apologized. He didn't take his eyes off of her, filled with betrayal, like she had destroyed his relationship or cheated on him with a high school sweetheart. "I know that Todd walks to work because he's afraid his car will get damaged." Lana crossed her arms. "If you'll let me in the garage, I happen to have a dozen eggs with his name written all over them."
He lifted one beefy hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Go for it," he muttered, waving at the door through the kitchen. "Any eggs in the fridge are yours—" He unfolded the last letter, skimmed it, distractedly brushing one finger over the font. He considered, staring, like he yearned for the text to change and bend into something new, something different. "I'll be out in a few minutes." Clearing his throat, he stood from the kitchen table. "With a hammer and a can of spray paint."

"Fuck, yes." Lana grabbed Mary Eunice by the elbow and dragged her along, into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and took two cartons of eggs. In the garage, a luxurious car waited, sparkling like an angel's wings, a bright yellow color like the sun. Lana stacked the two cartons of eggs on the top of the car and went out the loud garage door to her car, where she returned with the dozen eggs they had just purchased. "Here." She opened the box and held it out to Mary Eunice. Twelve opportunities glistened up at her with white shells, like taunting eyeballs.

She shuffled back. "I—I can't—It's not right—" She crossed her arms and sucked in a deep breath, measuring herself. "I don't think I should." Her tongue flitted out across her dry lips.

Lana took the first egg from the carton and hurled it against the hood of the car where it splattered into an oozing glaze, white and yolk mingling. "Try it." She smirked. "It's incredibly satisfying." Then, she took a second egg and smashed it. "It will make you feel better."

In the daylight of the dusty garage streaming through the open door, Lana's nut brown eyes contained alluring temptation—not tempting like Satan leading her to sin, but tempting like a someone unlocking the bars to her prison cell and beckoning her to join them in freedom. She secured her hand around the white shell of the large egg and pinched it between her fingertips. The shell, strong yet brittle, glowed. It will make you feel better. With those words, Lana's words of comfort, ringing strong in her mind, she lobbed the egg against the windshield.

It splashed in a sickening crack! and she flinched at the sound of it. Her lips trembled. But something inside her eased. Todd's ugly face, cocky, handsome, ugly in its arrogance, floated there on the windshield, and she hurled another egg at him. "That's right. Let it out. You've been hurting for a long time." Lana's words were background noise as she added more makeup, more decoration, to Todd's wealth. "It's okay to be angry. Let it out."

Each encouragement spurned a more intense chucking of the eggs; by the time she flung the last one in the dozen, she was panting and sweating. A fire had erupted inside her stomach. This is wrong; you shouldn't feel this way. You're stupid. You're weak. You're pathetic. But for the first time in her life, she didn't feel weak. She felt empowered. Lana stood beside her, steady, and when she stopped, she lowered her head. "Feel better?"

"Mhm." Real words had evacuated from her mind, sensing the fire, smelling the smoke as her peace and calmness burnt to ashes.

Earl entered the garage, carrying two cans of spray paint and a hammer. She straightened at the sight of him, having forgotten his promise to return. "How do you think the words 'fag hag' will look if I put one on each door of his car?" the man mused aloud. "Too much?"

"Just enough," Lana assured.

Hands on his hips, he rolled back onto his heels to appraise the car. "You have made good work on it so far." He extended the hammer to Lana by its butt. "Would you like the honors?"

"Give it to her. She's just discovering her inner vengeance."

The kind, old man faced Mary Eunice, offering the wooden hammer to her like a tithe given to
God in a church. "Sister?" He had a delicate voice and eyes, the way she had always imagined her father would look at her, some memory reconstructed and demolished and refurbished so many times that the original face no longer had any set shape.

"I—I don't know…" She licked her lips and looked to Lana for guidance, for some clue. You shouldn't. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's property. Thou shalt not steal. Somehow, she felt that vandalism fit between those two categories—stealing the value of Todd's car because something inside her coveted his peace of mind. He stole that from you. You are reclaiming what is rightfully yours. Her inner voice—not the hateful, self-deprecating one, but the rational one—had taken Lana's unique tone, complete with her slight lisp.

"Take it." Lana's instructions cut through her musing, all heavy with internal warfare. And with her recommendation, the hammer weighed in Mary Eunice's hand, cool and unyielding.

"I don't know what to do." It curdled in her gut. You should not seek vengeance. It was your fault. You were stupid and you paid the price. Like Aunt Celest always said, you don't have enough sense to make a nickel. Her heart floundered around in her chest cavity, a fish out of water seeking breath. "I—I think I shouldn't—it really—" She swallowed, trying to cure her dry mouth.

Dark eyes found hers. In the dusty golden afternoon light, Lana's eyes took the strangest amber hue, all things passionate and devoted. "Remember what I told you." She put one hand over Mary Eunice's, wrapped it around the handle, squeezed her knuckles. "You can do it. I know you can."

Her tongue wouldn't rest in her mouth, rolling around; her pulse throbbed in its underside. Should I be able to feel my pulse in my tongue? "Do it with me." Her voice had the same breathy texture as before, as it sought vocal cords but could find no friction. Lana's body, pressed against hers, provided support. The caress of her skin brought back the sounds of her voice, minutes earlier. You did nothing to deserve this. The people who did this to you are bad people. "Do it with me," she repeated, seeking solidarity.

"Together," Lana confirmed, breath warming Mary Eunice's cheek. They were close like they fit together in bed at night when the coldness crept up between them under the blankets, Lana's eyelashes brushing her skin in tickles like a cat's whiskers. Their arms moved in synchronization, balancing the heavy weight of the hammer between them, and brought it down on top of the hood of the car.

The sound of metal bending and plastic smashing, paint chips fluttering through the air, sent an exhilarated hiccup through Mary Eunice. She started to take a step back, to admire the single blow they had planted upon the car, but Lana drove her onward, hand squeezing her, urging her to continue, and the flames in her belly leapt, snatching at the fodder provided to them and consuming it, burning brighter and yearning with more hunger.

Somewhere in the midst, she lost Lana; there were eggs flying over her head and shattering on top of the car. Earl ducked out of the way when she bashed in the windows. The spray paint smeared across her pants. The glass shards shredded into her hands and arms and spattered into her face. Each little cut left in their wake drove her more furiously until the floor of the garage crunched underfoot with shattered glass. I did that. Lana was out of eggs, but she had found a crowbar and drew patterns in the paint where Mary Eunice's hammer hadn't done a complete job.

Her arm ached and her palm had a generous layer of sweat, so she dropped the hammer. It clattered to the floor. Her throat, all thick and pressured and dry, fought the urge to swallow. Sweat matted into her hair and streamed into her eyes, making them burn and weep. Is that an earthquake? Her body tremored with such force, such power, she couldn't calm it, and the world around her shook.
Earl broke the silence. "You're one helluva nun, kid." He eyed the Lamborghini once more. "I think we've done our job. It's definitely not drivable." Lana placed an arm around Mary Eunice's waist—Where did she come from? When did I lose her?—and he scanned them. "Do you girls want to come in for a drink? Todd doesn't get off until six. We've got plenty of time to rest in the proverbial eye of the storm."

Mary Eunice's lower jaw seized; she couldn't speak. She kept accidentally biting her tongue. Why am I shaking so hard? Her heart had never beaten so fast before in her life. She sought Lana's guidance, wild-eyed and frightened. What's happening to me? Lana read her expression. I want to go home. "Sister Mary Eunice doesn't imbibe. I should take her home before we tempt her into additional sin."

He lifted his head, chuckling. "Right." Clucking his tongue, he assured, "I'll cover for both of you. I would've fucked his car, anyway, once I found out—can't believe I trusted that little bastard." The rueful, sad expression came to his face once again. "It was nice to see you, Lana. You should come around more often—on better terms."

"I'll make a point of it." Mary Eunice stumbled when Lana tugged on her, legs rubbery beneath her, reluctant to hold her weight. Her knees and toes twitched. "Thanks, Earl." The driveway stretched before her like a mile trek, but Lana's hovering heat beside her in the cool October breeze led her to stumble, numb and drunk on power, into the passenger seat of the car.

"Jesus H. Christ, there is glass in your hair." Lana brushed a lock of stringy blonde hair from her face. "You've got little cuts everywhere. We've got to clean you up." Lana's words echoed through a tunnel of sensation, each bit teasing her and brightening her surroundings; she couldn't calm the heaving of her chest or her rapid heartbeat. The brush of fingertips on her cheek caused her to turn her head like a rooting infant. "Calm down. It's over. How do you feel?"

Mary Eunice's tongue wriggled in her mouth, a worm, and she fought to gain control over it. Her cheeks and lips were another battle. "Never better." It had a crooked stammer to it, but in spite of her physical confusion, her emotions had settled. Lana probed her with those piercing eyes, seeking answers, reassurance. "Tired, but—good. Good." Her smile wavered with all the twitches.

A grin eased the tension on Lana's face, and she opened her arms. Mary Eunice curled beside her and rested her head upon Lana's shoulder, let her eyes fall closed. "Good. You should always feel good." Lana picked a couple shards of glass out of Mary Eunice's hair. "Now we have to hope your priest doesn't ask too many questions tomorrow."

"It'll be fine." That's surprisingly optimistic, Lana observed, but Mary Eunice had her eyes half-closed, everything shaking, fingers wiggling, while she fought to calm herself. You drained her. The nun, in the heat of the moment, had lost all control, like she experienced a second possession, but in her blue eyes, no evil glimmered; rather, she glowed with all of the pain she had internalized for so long. It was beautiful, Mary Eunice in her freest form, not inhibited by vows or modesty or self-hate. "You?"

Lana touched a small bleeding cut on Mary Eunice's cheek and wiped the forming dribble; it left a red smear on her skin. "I'm sore," she admitted. I feel like the car probably feels right now. "But it was worth it." She cranked the car and drove down the street, consumed by the late afternoon light on the horizon. "I hope the milk is still cold."

A drowsy smile touched Mary Eunice's pink lips. "Gotta go back for more eggs anyway, don't we?" Her face had sweaty blotches from the exertion, tiny cracks in her skin like a broken doll, hair hanging in mats, but God, has she always been this beautiful? galloped through Lana's mind like a loose horse; she couldn't catch the rogue stallion. Her head rested on Lana's shoulder, the
way she had dreamed of one day driving along the beach in a convertible with a lover, wind whipping through their hair, no one to watch them or harass them for the love they shared. *Fuck, you're tired. As if you could ever afford a convertible.*

The road home hummed, silence between the two women; Lana suspected that Mary Eunice had dozed off. The pink paint had dried on the leg of her pants. Her breath had a sweetness to it as it heated Lana's cheek. Lana winced as the car bounced into the driveway, jarring Mary Eunice awake into a few bleary blinks. "Morning, sunshine," Lana greeted in a deadpan. "We're home."

She had stiffened during the trip, and as she hauled upward out of the car, her abdomen clenched in protest. She winced. Mary Eunice scrambled out of the car to Lana's side; all of her previous exhaustion and emotional trepidations forgotten, she carried the worried curl on her lips again, the concern tingling into her eyes. "Do you want me to help you? No, I'll get the groceries. You shouldn't lift anything—"

*Well, that didn't last very long.* Her brief peace with Mary Eunice calm and spent had ended as she roared back to life, complete with ever-present concern and doubt. "I'm fine." Lana placed a hand on her stomach where, underneath, the stitches burned. The afternoon had drawn a heavy sweat from her, and now the bandage itched and slid uncomfortably across her skin. "I'm just a little stiff. Let me help." The stitches stung, but she had no intention of crawling woefully in bed and allowing Mary Eunice to coddle her like a favored teddy bear.

Mary Eunice, with reluctance painted across her blood-smeared face, stepped out of the way, still plagued with the questions of, "Are you sure?" which Lana answered with a baleful look; the guilt, earlier vanquished in the heat of unleashed rage, now returned tenfold upon her pale face. She took the gallons of milk before Lana could consider trying to lift them. "I don't want you to be hurt—you have to go to work tomorrow—you should rest."

"I'm having lunch with my boss. *I promise* I won't keel over while I'm eating my sandwich." In spite of her assurances, it took a great deal of effort to climb the steps to the front porch, and she hissed a string of swear words under her breath while she lumbered into the house. Mary Eunice eyed her as they entered the kitchen. Lana began to put away the groceries, stuffing everything into cabinets without much consideration for the order.

"What do you want for dinner?"

"Don't worry about dinner yet." Lana shooed her out of the kitchen. "We need to brush all the glass out of your hair first and patch up your face a little bit. Is it in your clothes?"

"I—I don't know." In the bathroom, Lana started to pluck at the hem of her sweater. *This is her favorite. She wears it all the time.* It didn't smell like Wendy anymore; it had been washed enough times that the perfume had faded entirely. "I can—you don't have to—"

"I can do this, or I can cook dinner." Mary Eunice promptly closed her mouth. "That's right. Neither of us wants to die in a preventable fire." Lana tugged the sweater up over her head and shook it out, listening to the tinker of glass onto the tile floor. Tiny cuts scattered Mary Eunice's arms and collarbones. "You look like you just survived the third world war." She gathered up the tangled mats of hair and dragged her brush through it. "I'm not quite as good at this as you are." She picked a few visible shards of glass from the golden locks. "I grew up wearing a bob, and my sister absolutely refused to let me touch her hair."

"I think I'll survive." Mary Eunice smiled up at her, shy, folded into herself as she watched Lana work; she never winced in spite of the sharp tugging at her scalp, for which Lana always apologized. *What made her so patient?* "Did your parents like your hair short?"
Lana snorted. "My mother despised it. But I liked it that way, and my father believed that I should decide how long to wear my hair. He called the shots. I got the haircut I wanted. Mama had Frieda—she had no shortage of hair to play with. Frieda worshipped her hair." She tugged the brush through smoothly and moved to the next long strand of hair. Her fingers combed through the underlying layer, feeling for any missed mats. "I was always occupied playing baseball. One of the neighborhood boys got a bat and ball for Christmas one year, and that was history. It was surprising our parents ever saw any of us again."

"I bought James a baseball for his seventh birthday," Mary Eunice reflected. "He loved it. He always wanted me to play catch with him. I wasn't very good, though." Lana chuckled at that admission. "Then, for Christmas, he wanted a bat—I had saved for months to get it for him—but when I went to buy it, all of my money was gone. I was furious with Molly, I knew she was the only one who knew where I kept it. She swore she hadn't stolen it. I didn't believe her." Lana quieted, watching her face. She never tells happy stories. She doesn't have any happy stories. "On Christmas morning, Aunt Celest gave him a baseball bat. She told him that Santa Claus gave her just enough money to buy it for him. She looked at me and put her finger to her lips, and I knew she had taken it. I apologized to Molly, but it was weeks before she talked to me again."

"That's awful."

Mary Eunice ducked her head. "I was just glad James got what he wanted. It was Christmas. He deserved it."

Lana's lips parted, incredulous at Mary Eunice's nonchalant attitude. "But she stole from you. That didn't bother you? Even a little bit?" Mary Eunice shrugged, but her right hand went to pick at her left forearm again; the tiny, scabbed blisters she had formed were swollen, like bug bites. Lana swatted her hand away. "Stop that—you're hurting yourself."

She folded her arms tight around herself. "I—I was upset that I had blamed Molly when it wasn't her fault. She had every right to be angry with me." Then her teeth plucked up her lower lip. A small part of Lana wanted to tell her to knock that off, too, but she restrained herself. "But—no. It was for James, anyway, and that's where it went. I lived with Aunt Celest. I didn't pay rent. It was just compensation."

"You live with me," Lana reminded her. "That doesn't give me the right to steal from you." She brushed through the rest of Mary Eunice's hair, smoothing down the stray flyaways with her hand. "Hold still—close your eyes. I'm going to clean up these cuts." Mary Eunice's nose rolled up into a pained wince when Lana dabbed the cotton ball soaked in rubbing alcohol onto her cuts. "Sorry. Some of these are kind of deep."

"No—I shouldn't have gotten carried away—"

"Vandalizing the car was my idea." Lana peered at one of the cuts; it gaped open. I'll check it out again later. "And you needed it."

Mary Eunice fidgeted under Lana's hands; Lana got a clean cotton ball and started on the lacerations on her collarbones, where the cool liquid trickled down into her bra, between her breasts. "I lost control—I was just so—angry—" She swallowed hard when Lana lifted her left arm and began to medicate the small wounds, some self-inflicted, some not. "I shouldn't have let myself do it—it was petty—I'm stupid."

Lana studied the pick-marks on Mary Eunice's arm and swathed the cotton ball over them. "You're not stupid." She wanted to treat the wounds with petroleum jelly and wrap them in gauze so that Mary Eunice couldn't reach them, but she knew that Mary Eunice needed to shower, so she patted them dry once she had disinfected them. "And the bastard deserved it. He deserved
A pursed frown appeared upon Mary Eunice's face. "We ruined his life," she whispered. "I didn't want to hurt anyone—Earl was heartbroken—and what is Todd going to do?"

"Hey." Lana lifted Mary Eunice's chin with her thumb. "We didn't ruin Todd's life. Todd ruined Todd's life." She dabbed the cotton ball at a cut she had missed. "Hopefully he'll become a responsible human being and move in with his wife and take care of his family. Or maybe he'll run away." A dark, wry chuckle worked its way out of her. "We gays are better at running away than anyone else. She didn't speak it aloud, knowing Mary Eunice wouldn't understand. "Earl has been heartbroken before. He'll survive. He'll pick up another guy at Pat Joe's by next month, the same way he found Todd." We run away from our families, from the police, from our partners when things go too fast and we're not ready. Sometimes we even run away from people who want to kill us. "You can't keep being angry at yourself for things that aren't your fault. You aren't responsible for the world."

Mary Eunice didn't respond, but when she lifted her hand as if to pick at her forearm again, she noticed Lana's gaze following the movement, and she stopped. Lana couldn't manage a full smile, abdomen aching too much for it to be plausible, but she tried her best. "Don't move. I'm going to get the broom."

She returned with the broom and dustpan, and Mary Eunice held the dustpan down while Lana swept all of the glass shards into it. She poured them into the trash can while Lana swept behind the toilet and under the sink, hoping to find any stray bits. "Good god, this room is spotless. Look at it. You don't have to keep it so clean."

"I know." Mary Eunice followed the broom strokes with her dustpan. "It gives me something to do." Once Lana finished sweeping the bits of nothing into the dustpan, she emptied it.

Lana left while Mary Eunice showered, reclining on the couch while watching The Twilight Zone reruns; she dozed off to Rod Serling's clipped narration, and when she awoke, a buttery smell rose from the kitchen. She blinked a few times, eyes adjusting to the lack of light. "Sister? What time is it?" Mary Eunice didn't answer. "Sister?"

Her body felt light and spry as she rolled to her feet. I was sore earlier. What happened? Rod Serling was still talking, delivering his lines. He never talks this long, she thought, dim, and she listened to him. "It was all for the story, wasn't it, Lana? You killed Wendy for the story. You got everything you wanted—the story for a lifetime. If only you could find a time machine, turn back to the past, and fix everything. It would be possible, if you were in The Twilight Zone."

Oliver Thredson strode out of the kitchen with two steaming bowls. Red liquid sloshed around inside them. Blood—"Lana! I'm so glad you're awake. I've just finished cooking dinner." He placed the bowl on the kitchen table, and her legs operated without her consent, sitting across from him. "I realize that it is unconventional for me, as your husband, to prepare meals, but given your condition, I find it appropriate to care for you."

Lana blinked at him. What? "My condition?" she echoed, and he nodded pointedly to her, mouth full of the blood stew. She looked down, stomach distended and heavy with pregnancy. Her heart hiccuped in her chest, throat swelling. She jerked back from the table. The soup spilled down her front. "No—No, this isn't right—" Her strangled cries rose in uneven waves. "Where is Sister Mary Eunice? What did you do to her?"

He wore the inviting, benign smile he had donned when he first met her, the same smile she had trusted. "Lana," he said, slow, condescending, "you're confused again." He stood from the table,
both arms reaching to restrain her. "You've been babbling about this Sister Mary Eunice for weeks now—truly, I can't fathom it. She's in your head, just a figment of your imagination." He caught her by her wrists. She jerked back against his vice grip. "You need to sit down and eat dinner. I've prepared it just for you and our son."

No. The protest died on her tongue while she shivered. The temperature of her house had dropped to frigid temperatures, frost on the windows; her breath curled in clouds in the empty space between her and Thredson. "No—Mary Eunice—She's here—She was here a few minutes ago—Sister!" The throaty cry didn't project. "What did you do to Mary Eunice? Where is she?"

He tugged her against him. She flailed, but she was powerless. He had an inhuman strength. His body held no warmth; he had chilled the room, the source of all the cold in the house. If she had licked him, her tongue would have stuck to his skin. "I can't kill someone who doesn't exist."

Lana stilled in his grasp. A voice rose up, low but joyful, singing an unfamiliar hymn. "Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart, naught be all else to me, save that Thou art."

"Thou my best thought by day or by night, walking or sleeping, Thy presence my light."

"I can hear her," Lana accused. "Where is she? What have you done to her?" She scoured his face, but he remained impassive to her demands. "Sister! Mary Eunice!" she cried, desperate. Can she hear me? "Where is Mary Eunice?" She throttled against Thredson, his unyielding body like ice, her round stomach giving her only a shred of space. "Let me go! I have to find her!"

Something popped inside her, and liquid gushed between her thighs. Thredson loosened his grip to appraise her, and she snatched free, but each step dragged heavily, like she ran through water. "Mary! Mary Eunice!" She could hear the voice, the singing, through the wall of the hallway. "Sister! I can hear you! I'm coming!" She thrust her hands against the wall, and it echoed, hollow. "Mary Eunice! Sister!"

Thredson pinched her by the shoulder, furious and fervent now, and she tore away from him. "No! Don't touch me! Sister! Mary Eunice!"

He spun her around to face him. "You're going into labor, Lana. You need to lie down and rest while you can." She floundered, but he held her fast. "There is no Mary Eunice. It's a myth. Do you understand? She isn't real. You must forget the fantasy. You're about to be a mother."

"Like hell I am!" Lana bolted from him like a frightened horse; he didn't relent, and neither did she, dragging against him with every ounce of strength in her body. "Sister! Mary Eunice! Sister!" The tears stung like BBs on her face. "Mary, please!" Thredson wrapped his arms around her middle and lifted her over his shoulder with such gentle patience. "Mary Eunice!" she screeched a final time.

A cool hand embraced her cheek, and she wrenched herself out of the dream. "I'm right here." The lamplight blinded her, but at the sound of Mary Eunice's voice, she flung out her arms, seeking refuge. She earned a hug in return. "I'm right here, Lana." Mary Eunice's hair was still wet. She smelled like butter from the kitchen.

Lana's tongue flapped around. "Run," she whispered. "He's coming—He was—He's—" It quieted when she realized that her mouth was locked within her dream, not yet freed from Thredson's grasp. She blinked against the yellow lamplight until she could focus her blurry vision upon Mary Eunice's face. Her arms latched tightly around the other woman's neck, a monkey clinging to a branch. Her lips gnarled into a trembling twist. Each breath ached.
But the clinging confusion didn't offset Mary Eunice. "It's okay. I've got you. I'm right here. I'm here for you." The sound of her voice made Lana's innards tingle with sensation, unidentified emotion. "You're safe. I won't let anyone hurt you. I'm here now."

**What made you so magical?** Lana's tears fell, and Mary Eunice let them, holding her in a jumbled tangle of limbs; she didn't stop talking, repeating the same mantras, "It's okay," and, "I'm here," and when she had exhausted those, she uttered Bible verses, broken snippets from her memory. "The Lord doth build up Jerusalem," she murmured. "He gathereth together the outcasts of Israel. He healeth the broken in heart and bindeth up their wounds. He telleth the number of the stars; He calleth them all by their names." One hand smoothed over Lana's weeping face, tucked her hair behind her ear. Lana leaned into the caress, "I'm sorry," Mary Eunice said. "There's more to that verse, but I've forgotten it. I don't read my Psalms as often as I should."

A weak smile broke Lana's twisted face. "I just like to hear your voice." She curled her fingers through Mary Eunice's. "Were you—" She struggled through a few blinks, stemming the flow of tears and the thickness in her mouth. "Were you singing? I heard you—in my dream—I couldn't find you—" She shivered, and Mary Eunice tugged the throw off of the back of the couch and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"I was." Mary Eunice touched her shoulder. "You were calling my name. I had a hard time waking you up." She tuck a lock behind Lana's ear. "Are you okay?"

Lana swallowed the heavy saliva in her mouth. "I—I think so." She tangled both of her hands into Mary Eunice's. "Just—don't leave, yet—please." *Don't be ridiculous*, she scolded herself. *You don't need her. Grow up.* But Mary Eunice kept one arm around her shoulders, welcoming and gentle, and Lana rested against her, eyes open, fixed on her face.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" Lana shook her head. She wasn't ready for that yet. "Okay. Just tell me what you need." *Copious amounts of alcohol, for starters, and a goddamn cigarette.* The flavor of tobacco reminded her of Briarcliff; she did not partake any longer. Mary Eunice hummed the tune Lana had heard in her dream.

How long they rested there, Lana wasn't sure, but Mary Eunice finally said, "The noodles are going to burn," and Lana relinquished her so that she could run back into the kitchen and save their dinner.

Mary Eunice brought her a steaming bowl of spaghetti. "Thank you, Sister." The nun smiled at her in response, shy, but her blue eyes glowed when she received the praise. "I don't know where I would be if I didn't have you to keep my head on straight." She stewed the spaghetti on her fork. "Probably the homeless shelter. I *definitely* would've burned the house down by now." They both laughed, and Lana scooted nearer to her on the couch—nearer, so she could hear the throaty croak of Mary Eunice's laughter and the heavy sigh of each exhale. With those things at her ear, she felt whole once again.
Pray Without Ceasing

Chapter Notes

Chapter title: 1 Thessalonians 5:17

Morning arrived with a vengeance for Mary Eunice, whose dreamless sleep clattered to a halt when Lana sat bolt upright in bed and grabbed her by the shoulder. "Sister! We overslept!" She rolled out of the bed and dressed while Lana hobbled into the bathroom in rapid, crooked steps. "It's ten-turdy—" she slurred around a mouthful of toothbrush and toothpaste. "Yer 'ppointment is at eleven—boss is gonna wonder where I am—" She spat a couple times into the sink and rinsed her mouth, speech dying out.

Mary Eunice dropped down to her hands and knees, fumbling around in the box under the bed for her Bible and habit. The Bible was where she had left it after she had last read it, but the habit wasn't in the box any longer. "Did you take my—" As she rose up onto her knees, Lana hovered over her and popped a toothbrush into her open mouth. She caught it between her lips. "Oof—'fank you." She stood, and Lana spun her around, gathering up her hair and brushing it in coarse strokes. Mary Eunice scrubbed her teeth in turn, but the head of the brush felt strange on her tongue, and the handle was the wrong color. "Thih isn't my toofbrush."

She rested on the edge of the bed when Lana pushed her, unable to reach the top of her head. "It isn't?" Lana peered over her. "Oh god, it's mine. I'm sorry. I swear you can't catch the gay." Mary Eunice choked on her spittle, sending toothpaste splatters down the front of her pajamas. Lana wiped them off with her thumb and ushered her back into the bathroom.

She spat into the sink. "I was more concerned about the common cold and flu, personally." Lana tossed a wet washcloth at her, and she washed her face, dodging carefully around all of the tiny cuts and scrapes on her skin; behind her, Lana snatched the brush through her own hair, wincing and cursing under her breath. "But have you seen my habit?"

"I hung it up in the closet—It hasn't been washed—Do you need it? You're going to be sneezing if you wear it. It's super dusty." Lana swatted her in the face with a dry washcloth and patted her dry. She attacked Mary Eunice with a few expert dabs of her makeup sponge. "This is not quite your color." Mary Eunice winced at the puff of powder. "Will you sit down? I can't see. You're taller than me."

Sitting on the lid of the toilet seat, Lana flushed the foundation up and down her skin, spreading it over all of the small wounds on her face. The bewilderment tangled her tongue for a long moment until she managed to sputter a protest. "I'm not supposed to wear makeup."

"You're also not supposed to vandalize cars, but here we are." Lana rubbed it in, appraising, tongue pinched between her front teeth like she couldn't quite decide if she was satisfied with the end result. "He won't notice, I promise. It's not like I'm slathering you in red lipstick and eyeshadow." Tipping Mary Eunice's chin back, she searched the underside of her neck for any additional nicks. When Mary Eunice's right hand went to pick at her left arm, Lana batted it away like second nature. "My name is Sister Mary Eunice, and I did not smash all of the glass out of a Lamborghini yesterday. Repeat?"

Heat rushed to her cheeks, and she ducked her head, mumbling, "My name is Sister Mary Eunice,
and I did not smash all the glass out of a… What's it called again?"

Lana grinned. "Lamborghini." She traced her thumb over a cut on Mary Eunice's eyebrow, narrowing her eyes, but after a brief consideration, she nodded her approval. "There. You're beautiful." The tips of Mary Eunice's ears warmed, but Lana didn't notice, charging out of the bathroom; she struggled into a pair of skinny jeans, wincing at the pressure it placed on her bandaged middle. "Goddamn, I'm sore."

"We need to change your bandages." Mary Eunice reached to pick at her arm, but she stopped herself in the middle of the gesture and took one of Lana's wrists instead.

Brown eyes followed the movement, prepared to bat her away from her nervous habit, but once Mary Eunice's hand closed around hers, Lana shook her head. "We don't have time. I changed it last night. It should be fine." She fought the tight buckle of the pants again.

Mary Eunice's hand stilled hers. "Don't be silly. I've seen you almost die too many times recently. I can't let you get an infection now." She smiled, soft and lacking the impatient jerks plaguing Lana's body; she placed no hurry on health, especially Lana's health, which had been grossly precarious for the last week.

"Only once," Lana objected while Mary Eunice took the small kit she had compiled for Lana's wound care. "I only almost died once."

The scissors sliced through the thick gauze. "Once is still too many times," She peeled back the white material and sponged off the sewn wound. "Do you know how long the stitches take to dissolve?" The edges of the wound had a red tinge, but it hadn't spread like infection. She drew across it with petroleum jelly on the tip of her finger.

Lana watched her, dark eyes wide and vulnerable, a particular glow in them. Mary Eunice looked up at the cupid's bow of her lips, the slight pucker of her upper lip. She's so pretty when she looks like that. The attraction squelched like mud in the pit of her belly, awoke an urge in her to hug Lana; it wasn't uncomfortable, but affectionate and honest. "Probably a few more weeks." Lana scratched at the tip of her nose, and a nervous chuckle rose from her chest. "It itches."

Unwrapping fresh gauze, Mary Eunice nodded. "It probably will for awhile. That means it's healing." She eyed the tight pants. "Maybe you shouldn't wear those. They're going to be awfully uncomfortable." She said the words quietly, meekly, almost like a question.

"You're right." The corner of Lana's lip curled. "They don't really fit me, anyway. Wendy was shorter than me." She peeled the tight jeans off of her legs like a banana peel and sought a different pair of pants, lips twisted downward, and at the mention of Wendy, Mary Eunice found herself at a loss for words. She never knew what to say when Lana's dead lover was mentioned, never knew how to provide comfort. She had worn out her apologies, but every time Lana hesitated in the hallway to look at Wendy's picture, guilt flushed through her intestines like a wriggling worm unearthed from the soil.

Lana chose a pair of loose slacks instead and slipped into a pair of flats while Mary Eunice took her habit out of the closet and shook it to try to dislodge the dust; it rose in a cloud, and she buried her face in the crook of her elbow before she sneezed. "God bless." Lana buttoned up a long-sleeved blouse and took the piece from her. "You're going to wear something under this, right?"

"Of course." Her brows quirked together. "Why wouldn't I? It's terribly itchy otherwise."

Pausing, Lana frowned. "But the last time…" After she battled a shadowed perplexion upon her face, she shrugged. "Yeah, you're right. That wasn't really you, so it doesn't count." She dropped
the habit onto the bed and dragged out a long-sleeved T-shirt and a comfortable, modest skirt from the closet, thrusting them at the nun, who caught them in a clumsy snatch.

"What?" Mary Eunice followed Lana with her eyes. "What are you talking about?" Lana attempted to shrug it off, but she pressed, "You've got to tell me now. What did I do?"

"It wasn't criminal, I promise."

"Lana!"

Lana sighed, relenting. "When you burned up your habit, you were wearing this silk lace lingerie underneath it. Bright red." Mary Eunice's face pinched up, and Lana dragged the T-shirt on over her head. "I would say it was attractive, but the black vomit was a bit of a deterrent." She guided one arm through a sleeve. "Hey, you can't pout now. We're running late."

Mary Eunice nodded and clothed herself, but she held to a pensive silence, staring down at the floor while Lana combed through her hair a few more times. Lana secured her coif and helped her button her habit. "Don't do this," Lana dissuaded. She took Mary Eunice's face by the chin. "Look at me. You always look like that when you start hating yourself. I can watch it on your face, and it's not right." How does she always know? "I hope this priest knows how to tell you in godly terms that you deserve better." A single tear budded in the corner of her eye, and Lana caught it on her thumb. "And you really can't cry. It will smear your makeup, and then you'll have a whole slew of things to explain to the man."

An easy grin touched Lana's lips, and Mary Eunice allowed her watery expression to soften, both blue eyes drawn to Lana's smile, the way it deepened her laugh lines, the way her eyes crinkled at the edges. The flyaway strands of her hair matched the slight craze to her harried expression, added a delightful splash of fun. "Thank you." Lana left her once she murmured the words, the small gift of thanks. She took her rosary in the pocket of her habit and followed Lana once she had found a pair of shoes.

Lana wore a stylish brimmed hat. "What are you doing?" she called when Mary Eunice went into the kitchen. "We don't have time for breakfast—we've got, like, ten minutes to get you to church! I'm just going to assume that God doesn't care for tardiness!"

"I'm not making breakfast." Mary Eunice closed the refrigerator came out with a brown paper sack rolled down. "I packed your lunch last night. I thought, maybe, you would be in a rush this morning, and I didn't want you to worry about what you would—"

Her words cut off abruptly, mouth gaping like a beached fish straining for water, when Lana's lips collided with her cheek in a slight peck, almost nonexistent, just a momentary brush of skin on skin; it still silenced Mary Eunice, whose mortified face melted into deep pink heat. "You're divine." Lana seized her hand and dragged her from the house while her other hand floated to her cheek, touched the place where Lana's lips had brushed. They were really soft and sort of—wet. She memorialized the words, the sensation, pressed them into iron so she would not lose the memory.

Father Joseph's church was only a few blocks away from Lana's house; Lana parked in the parking lot. "Wait." Lana pulled a notepad from her purse and scrawled a series of numbers. "I'm going to be back at twelve. If something happens and I don't show up, this first one is for Barb and Lois's house. One of them will come get you. If they don't answer, this next one is Barb's work—the last one is Earl." Her dark eyes bored into Mary Eunice. "Whatever you do, don't try to walk home. You're dressed in full nun get-up and living with a lesbian. You're a walking target for a hate crime."
Lana tore the paper out of the notepad and folded it; Mary Eunice tucked it into the pocket of her habit with her rosary. Her belly leapt into frightful flames at the thought of something happening to Lana. "Hey." Lana's voice cut through her momentary terror, but it didn't hold any of the comfort Mary Eunice always found. Its frigid notes carried Lana's own fear, her eyes reflecting them. "Promise me you won't walk home." She wore the darkness that haunted her when she awoke from her nightmares of Bloody Face.

She's afraid of losing me. The thought touched Mary Eunice, but in the same note, her inner caregiver roused, sought to comfort Lana's misplaced fears. "I promise." She donned a warm smile and reached for Lana's hand, clenched white-knuckled on the steering wheel. "Relax. I'm going to church. Nobody is waiting to eat me in there."

"I know." Lana's tongue darted out across her lips. "I know," she repeated, stronger the second time. "I'm being silly." No, you're not. Mary Eunice bit back the words. You're protecting me, and I'm honored to have your devotion when I've done nothing to earn it. "Twelve o'clock, okay?"

"I'll be outside."

"Inside. Wait inside."

"Inside," Mary Eunice corrected, raising her eyebrows. Her belly rumbled, but she ignored it. Shouldn't have slept in if you wanted to eat breakfast. Stupid stupid stupid. She reached for the door handle, but it was locked. "Lana."

Lana scrambled to unlock it. "Sorry! God, I'm making you late, I'm sorry." She probed her own temples and sucked in a long breath. "Have fun. I'll see you in an hour." She waved, small and almost timid—if anything about Lana could be timid. No, she's not timid. She's nervous. But even nervousness seemed misplaced upon Lana's typically stoic facade.

In spite of herself, Mary Eunice's lips curled, more assured in her smile; it made little sense, that Lana's discomfort and fear evoked more calm and self-assurance from her, but perhaps only one of them could be fearful at a time. She climbed out of the car and glanced back at Lana. "I love you."

Lana's face softened, all the nerves alleviating; Mary Eunice didn't wait to see if she returned the words, glad she had managed to allay her misgivings if only for a little while. She drew herself upright and strode with much more confidence than she felt into the grandiose church. This wasn't the one Lana had taken her to; it was larger, more impressive, colored pictures casting onto the floor and pews through stained glass windows. Her hand dug into the pocket of her habit for her rosary. A priest knelt at the altar in front of the church; the stage held statues of Mary and Jesus. A table in the back held the etching, "This do in remembrance of me." She swallowed hard, footsteps silent on the thin red carpet.

The door whined closed behind her and slammed shut, and she jumped at the sound; one hand fluttered to her mouth to ensure she didn't squeak to disturb the praying priest, but he rose from his knees and turned to face her. "Sister Mary Eunice." He greeted her like an old friend, arms open, mouth revealing crooked off-white teeth underneath. "It's good to finally meet you in person." He had thick salt and pepper hair and a grizzled beard, deep wrinkles framing his kind eyes.

"Father Joseph." Her expression wavered; she couldn't craft a full smile upon her twitching lips. This was the first time she and Lana had been separated in weeks, and while her adult mind insisted the ridiculousness of clinging to another person like a shield, the child within her wished she hadn't left the car so hastily.

He embraced her; he smelled like coffee and cinnamon, the way she had imagined Santa Claus
would smell when she was young. "Come with me, Sister. We have plenty to discuss." He had a charismatic voice, calm, like brownie batter dripping out of the bowl into the pan. Mary Eunice rolled the beads of her rosary between her thumb and index finger. She followed him through the long sanctuary, shadow blotting out the stained glass pictures on the floor, into a well-lit room with two arm chairs; in her mind, she imagined two men sitting opposite each other in tweed suits smoking cigars. "Have a seat. Would you like something to drink?"

Obedient, she sat on the edge of the green chair, perched like a bird preparing for take off. "No—thank you." She didn't stammer as much as she thought she would, but her fingers drummed a rhythm on her thighs; she had to resist the urge to pick at her arm through her habit.

The priest clutched a steaming mug of coffee between in his left hand. He flipped open a notepad and rested it on the arm of his chair. "I like to take notes," he explained as he scribbled something on top of the first piece of paper. "Once you get to be my age, you turn a little senile. It helps me remember what we discuss week to week." An easy smile worked upon his features, the gray mustache twisting his lip, furrowed like a thick brow. "Anything you say here is completely confidential. No one else is privy to my notes, and while I am bound to report to your Monsignor, those are in general terms. I won't tell him anything specific beyond whether I think you are making progress. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father."

His pen slashed along the notepad, but he didn't break eye contact with her. She fidgeted, heart in her throat. Lord, give me strength. She braced herself for an onslaught of personal questions visiting her darkest times; the tip of her tongue readied sorry tales of Clara, sought to stifle any visions of the Monsignor or Dr. Arden. "How do you feel today, Sister?"

The question caught her off-guard. "I—I'm fine?" She guessed at an answer that would satisfy him, more shrill than usual.

He chuckled. "There isn't a right or wrong answer. Did you sleep well last night? Are you comfortable?" She bobbed her head in response to both questions. "I understand you were removed from your home of service for your own safety. Where are you staying now?"

An easy sigh relaxed from her lungs. She could talk about Lana. Her hands unclenched, and she allowed herself to sink into the chair, blinks slowing, chest and shoulders loosening. "The Monsignor placed me with a—a former patient from Briarcliff, who was held wrongfully. Her name is Lana, and she's very good to me."

"I would wager a guess you're referring to Lana Winters?" Mary Eunice's eyes fluttered wide as Father Joseph pulled Lana's full name like a rabbit out of a hat. "You needn't look so astonished. She's a bit of a local celebrity now." He etched something else onto the paper. "So she treats you well? Do you feel safe with her?" A slight shadow crossed his face, ominous, a storm cloud on the horizon. What is he getting at?

Mary Eunice licked her lips. "Yes, she's a blessing. I—I'm not sure where I would be without her, to be honest. I am fortunate to have her friendship."

And like that, the shadow passed, eased into a friendly expression once more. "That's very good. Your safety is important. Do you have her support?" Her brow furrowed. "I mean to say, is she a believer? How does she treat your faith? Do you feel comfortable practicing around her?"

Oh. Mary Eunice's fingers quivered while she sought an appropriate answer. "Lana is very respectful of my faith. When the Monsignor brought me to her, I had nothing, but Lana gave me a rosary and a Bible." She toyed with the memory, the first night she had arrived at Lana's house,
naked and submerged in tepid water, having nothing to shield her from reality but the skinny arms of a woman she sort of knew. "She never interrupts me when I pray, and when I'm troubled, she offers counsel the best she knows how. I'm not certain what she believes—I know she isn't Catholic—but she is a good friend. I'm lucky to have her."

While the priest wrote something else down in the notebook, Mary Eunice's mind wandered to Lana. *Is she okay? Did she make it to her boss? Did I pack enough food for her lunch?* He interrupted her thoughts, lifting his head. "If she isn't Catholic, why did she have a rosary? A family heirloom, perhaps?"

"Um—" Mary Eunice's heart skipped a beat, uncertain if she could tell the truth. The priest had vowed the confidentiality of this meeting, and she had to hold him at his word; she would make no progress if she covered secrets with dirt as she went along. "Lana—she, er, she's—she prefers the company of women," she stammered; the word *gay* did not roll off of the tongue, stuck somewhere in her throat like the swear words she had never learned to say. The priest looked at her steadily, but he did not interrupt her. "Her partner—Wendy—was murdered by Bloody Face." She lowered her eyes to her lap. They felt safer there, less likely to evoke judgment. "Lana told me the things belonged to Wendy, that Wendy kept them out of nostalgia."

The sound of the pen scraping on the paper unnerved her. "I was aware of Lana's affliction, as is most of the state of Massachusetts and anyone getting news outside. The media has no trouble stripping anyone down to their bare bones." He sipped his coffee in a slurp; droplets of it clung to his beard. "You aren't telling her secrets, Sister. You don't need to feel guilty. I guarantee Lana is more than aware of how people perceive her." He settled with the mug on the end table again. "We all have skeletons in our closets. It's unfortunate that some of those skeletons wind up on the front page of the newspaper."

*Wendy wasn't a skeleton in the closet.* The voice in Mary Eunice's head sounded like Lana. *She was a real human being who lived and loved, and Lana loved her. That makes her important.* She plucked at the sleeve of her habit. Father Joseph smiled back at her, reassuring. "How do you feel about living with a homosexual?" He didn't say it like a slur, but she frowned nonetheless.

"Lana treats me with more kindness than I have ever known before," Mary Eunice replied. "She is my friend." She didn't have the courage to hold the priest's gaze; she stared at the toes of her shoes again. "I am hardly qualified to pass judgment on romantic love when it is not something I've ever experienced. But I've seen the way Lana mourns Wendy. It's heartbreaking—I can hardly bear it. I don't know how to comfort her. I never know what to say." She dabbed the corners of her eyes; Father Joseph provided a box of tissues on the center of the table, and she thanked him, taking one.

"You have a compassionate heart, Sister. There are others who would not grant Lana the benefit of sadness." She had to use the tissue carefully, afraid she would rub off the makeup Lana had applied earlier. "I would imagine the two of you share some similar scars. Is that why the Monsignor placed you together?"

"I—I'm not sure."

"Perhaps it's simply coincidence, then." His grizzled face wrinkled at the corners of his eyes, and he scratched upon the notepad. "Do you talk about Wendy often?" Mary Eunice shook her head. "Of course, that must be difficult, but in grief, sometimes the person mourning feels as if they are the only one who remembers. As if they're the only one who ever speaks the name. Lana trusts you enough to share her home with you. I think it would be healthy for both of you to talk about her."

*I thought we were here to talk about possession.* Mary Eunice wouldn't complain about the
direction this had taken—she didn't look forward to puzzling through broken memories to admit to sins she had witnessed through orange eyes of a broken soul—but it felt misplaced. As if reading her expression, Father Joseph said, "I know this seems unrelated. But I would like to talk about the things that make you feel safest first. I can tell you care about Lana." Mary Eunice nodded. "But there's something troubling you."

She plucked her lower lip between her teeth, scraping at the scab there. "I..." The words didn't form easily. "I blame myself for what happened to Lana and Wendy." She said this in a hushed tone, unable to enunciate any louder for fear of weeping. "Before Lana was incarcerated, when she still wanted to—to write a story about Kit Walker—they thought he was Bloody Face, then—and she found me in the woods behind Briarcliff. "Feeding the raspsers. She didn't elaborate. "She caught me off-guard and threatened me—I was afraid—I let her inside." Her chest hammered at the admission, things she had tried to say to Lana but could not bring herself to confess. "If I hadn't done that, she never would've been caught, Wendy wouldn't have been alone when she was killed, Thredson wouldn't have met Lana at all—"

Her words choked, so she paused to swallow hard. The priest ceased his scribbling. "Have you said anything of this to Lana?"

Shaking her head, her tongue gathered in the thick saliva of her mouth. "I—I'm afraid she will think less of me." Her arms crossed around her middle, hugging herself. "I know that's wrong, but—I value her friendship. I don't know how to apologize without risk of making her angry."

"A guilty conscience can never heal," the priest advised. "Think of Lana. Everything you've told me of her so far is overwhelmingly positive. Do you think of her as the type to hold anything against you? Do you think she would blame you?"

Mary Eunice hesitated. She recalled Lana's dark eyes, intense with feeling, gazing into hers. "I promised you if anyone messed with you, I would fuck them up." The memory of the words spiked a slight blush to Mary Eunice's cheeks. "You are extraordinary because you see people for what they can be instead of what they are." Then Lana shivered into a different position, curled on the couch, asleep but restless, hands and feet twitching against an invisible foe, words in a soft, incoherent babble. "Mary Eunice, where—Mary Eunice. Sister—Mary!"

Her hand rounded the sleeve of her habit. "No," she whispered. "She wouldn't."

Father Joseph's eyes crinkled into a smile. "Then you know what you need to do, Sister. You will feel better once you have lightened your conscience." He wrote down something else in the notepad. "What makes you feel alive? What are you passionate about? What makes you feel exhilarated?"

"I busted the windows out of a fancy car yesterday; that was sort of exciting." She rolled the tip of her tongue between her teeth until she guaranteed that she wouldn't speak the words aloud. "I—I don't know. Sister Jude says fun is a dressed-up name for temptation."

He chuckled at those words, raising his eyebrows at her dull answer. "There's nothing you enjoy doing?" She shrugged. "Then find something. Take up painting, or sewing, or some creative expression. Your friend is a journalist—write a story and share it with her. You should find a hobby and express yourself through it." He studied her. "Find a way to work through your thoughts. Do you dream?"

"I—" Mary Eunice paused and swallowed hard. "I have nightmares," she mumbled.

"That's not unusual," he reassured. "It may be beneficial for you to record your dreams so you can work through them once you're awake and find their place in your life. Do you understand?" Not
She nodded. "How much do you remember of your possession?"

"Just snippets—bits and pieces—I've dreamed some of it, and some when I see a certain face, or
smell a certain thing—" She gulped; her mouth had gone dry, her breath struggling along in her
chest, like her lungs had forgotten their job. "I see it more clearly when I'm alone. I can still hear
the voice, sometimes—the thoughts."

"That's enough." Father Joseph still wore his smile. *How does he not lose it? How does he remain
so calm?* "I don't want to upset you." He checked his watch. "I think we covered a lot, Sister.
You are very forthright, and I commend you for that." He studied her once. "Try to talk about
Wendy. Eliminating guilt is our first step. Will you try to do that?"

"Yes, Father."

"Then I'll see you next week, same time."

Mary Eunice showed herself out through the sanctuary and waited at the window to watch the
parking lot; Lana had fifteen minutes yet, so Mary Eunice wasn't concerned. Father Joseph
vanished somewhere in the back of the church. The sanctuary's silence echoed, a comfortable
silence for the nun, who welcomed the sacrilege of the church. A young man passed outside along
the stained glass windows and opened the large mahogany door. "Oh—hello." He had a slight
build, maybe eighteen, maybe twenty, and wore a baseball cap. His eyes narrowed. "Do you—Do
you work here? I've never seen a nun here before."

Mary Eunice's eyes widened. "Oh, no, I—I had a meeting with Father Joseph."

Something pricked inside her at the young man's slouching, hands buried deep in his pockets,
sleazy eyes crossing her form up and down. "Don't we all." He inhaled through his nose, snorting,
and rocked back on his heels. "You got the time?"

"Er—it's twelve minutes til."

"Great. I've got the time for a smoke." He took out a pack of cigarettes, and for a horrified
moment, Mary Eunice feared he would light up right there in the sanctuary of the church, but then
he opened the door to the outside. "Coming?" She scampered after him, ducking her head in
embarrassment, into the chilly October sunlight. Brown leaves danced through the parking lot.
"Want one?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you. I don't smoke. *He's standing awfully close. Swallowing a
lump in her throat, she side-stepped away from him, and he promptly filled the space with his
body. Her heart fluttered into her throat. Don't be ridiculous. He's just some kid. Probably a
hippie.* She eased her shoulders, trying to convince herself of the friendly young man's demeanor.

He shrugged. "Suit yourself." When he lit the cigarette, he blew the circle of gray smoke at her
face, mingling with the rank taste of his breath. She stepped back. *It was just the wind. But then it
happened again, and he winked at her. "So." He spat a loogie on the sidewalk. Oh, gross. "What
sort of backward thing did you do to wind up with Father Joseph? I mean—he takes all the
misfits. Tries to make us more Christ-like.*" He used air quotes around the word.

"I—I—" Mary Eunice grappled with her words. "I have been struggling with a reassignment
inside my order."

The boy snorted. "Of course. Nuns don't have real problems." He exhaled a thick, gray mouthful
of smoke. "My ma found my stash. Y'know, she sends me to this school, expects me to get an
education—it's the big thing now. Gotta fit in." Through the corner of his eye, he peered at her, a
darkness to his peeping eyes. "You're awful purty to have picked God to be your boyfriend. What's your name?"

His attention didn't make her feel warm inside like it did when Lana touched her; her stomach hardened and chilled, and the tips of her fingers began to shiver. "Thank you." Her tongue was stiff, wanting to rebuke him. *Don't be silly. He's just a kid.* "I'm Sister Mary Eunice."

"Groovy. I'm Kenny. Short for Kenneth, but nobody likes that name." He flicked the butt of his cigarette at her; the ashes landed in a smattering across the chest of her habit. "Oh, sorry." But his face didn't quirk into an apology; instead, he smirked. "Let me get that." She stepped back, away from his extending arm, but her foot slipped off of the edge of the sidewalk. He caught her by the elbow.

Her body stiffened against him as he tugged her closer. "Whatcha waiting for, Sister?" He grazed his hand across the front of her chest, too slowly; the ashes crumbled into a bigger gray mess, but he didn't pay any heed to them, gray eyes narrowing as he dug his thumb into her breast. "Hmm?"

"I—I—" Tears swelled to her eyes. "My friend is coming—to get me—" She found breath in uneven pants; all of the air around her tasted like his breath, cigarette smoke burning her nose. Through the layers of fabric, he could not feel the shape of her breast in a satisfactory way, but it drove him harder, grinding his palm against her. "Oh, I'm sure. He's probably six feet tall and very scary and vengeful over his nun friends—except, just like Jesus, he doesn't exist." She couldn't keep herself from weeping as he spat the words in her face, the spittle bouncing off of her cheeks. "Jesus's little whore even wears a little foundation. Impressive, Sister."

A motor rumbled down the road, and a station wagon turned into the parking lot of the church. "That—That's my friend—" Mary Eunice gasped; she shuffled, but his grip tightened, face not moving from hers. "Let me go—please—" *Lana, please hurry.*

A thousand terrible scenarios rushed through Lana's head like a torrenting river the moment Mary Eunice vanished into the tall doors of the church, but she could not afford to linger on them; she was late for meeting her boss, and if she waited in the parking lot, she would wind up following Mary Eunice. *You're being stupid. She's at a church. Priests don't eat people.* But, as the road hummed by, each stop sign became a malicious figure with a dagger under his cloak, waiting to spring on some innocent nun.

In her mind's eye, a skinny man crept into the church where Mary Eunice knelt in front of the altar with her hands clasped in reverent prayer. She remained, unsuspecting, until he grabbed her by the hair and held the barrel of a gun to her temple. "Where is your God now?" She didn't speak, frozen stock still, paralyzed and weeping in terror. "Hm? You don't know?" Her head exploded, deep red splatters across the statue of the Virgin Mary, rosary still clutched in her hand—Someone laid on their car horn as Lana coasted right through a red light. "Jesus fucking Christ!" She sped through the intersection before someone could demolish her vehicle. *You're going to be the one with an exploded head if you don't pay attention to the fucking road, you fuckwit.* "She's going to church, not a bar," she muttered under her breath. "She'll be fine."

She parked in front of the cafe Walter had chosen; he waited at a table, stirring a cup of coffee, sandwich untouched in front of him. Stepping out of the car, she approached him, adjusting her hat and sunglasses. "Lana! You're late. I was worried you had decided not to show." He stood and kissed her once on the cheek. "It's nice to see you. It's been a few weeks."
"Walt," she greeted, not nearly as excited about the meeting. Cut it out. You sound stiff. "How are you?" She forced a smile, trying to think of anything besides Mary Eunice’s exploded head—the same way Bloody Face’s had exploded—red, running down the walls.

"I’m fine." They sat, and Lana unwrapped the brown paper bag Mary Eunice had packed for her. Her appetite had vanished completely. "Now—I hate to pull you out of your vacation—but the office has been getting letters." She set her jaw. "I know you’re working on your book—by the way, I found you a publisher—gotta give you his number—but the people want you back." Of course they do. They’ll do anything to hear from me. "I know it’s ahead of schedule, but I was thinking, maybe, a compromise. Say, a story a week, just a small thing, or, like the Lana Winters column—like Dear Abby, but Dear Lana—"

Lana’s eyebrows quirked together. "You want me to write an advice column?" she asked, growing increasingly skeptical. "You’ve met me, right?"

"It could be Dear Abby, but liberal!" Walt corrected. "Don't like your husband? Go gay! Don't like the kids? Hire a babysitter! The Lana Winters column and Dear Abby feud—women debate over who they trust more—"

"I'm not going to advise housewives to leave their families for lesbianism," Lana replied, impatience seeping into her voice. She emptied the paper sack, picking through it. Good god, she packed a lot of food. Who did she think she was feeding? The queen of England? Mary Eunice had made two sandwiches—one peanut butter, one turkey—along with a bowl of canned pineapple, some carrot sticks, granola bars, potato chips, and two marshmallow puffs.

Walt, apparently, thought the same thing. "Were you packing for an army this morning?" He frowned at her, distracted from their conversation temporarily.

"I didn't pack it. My roommate did." God, I hope she's okay. Lana nibbled at the end of a carrot stick. "Do you want a sandwich? I've got peanut butter and turkey." She looked down at the scattered assortment of food Mary Eunice had compiled.

"Oh, no, I'll break into hives if I touch any of that. Anaphylactic shock is definitely not worth the exchange, but—so, a roommate?" Oh, for fuck's sake, why did I say anything? Walter's interest peaked, and he leaned forward, sipping at his coffee while he studied her. "What's she like, where's she from, what's her name?"

Lana bit the inside of her cheek. "Her name is Sister Mary Eunice," she growled, "and she's staying with me while the church works to reassign her to a new position."

Walter's face fell. "Wow. Sucks to be you. Can't even escape the Catholics once you've escaped the asylum." He picked up his own sandwich, thick with lots of extra lettuce; it had designer bread with a logo on the top spread. "But, anyway—so maybe Dear Lana is a bad idea. But I think we’re onto something. A column from you, weekly. Maybe you cover some large current event and just give your opinion on it. Talk about the war one week, and then hippie culture, then, the Rolling Stones or Martin Luther King, Jr. or something. You've got a lot to say, Lana. You're smart. And people want to hear what you think now. You've got the spotlight you always wanted. You need to take advantage of it."

Lip curling, Lana resisted the urge to spit back at him; instead, she checked her watch, the second hand ticking by all too slowly. "Fine." He brightened. "One column a week. I don't want to receive any letters from people seeking advice. I'm busy."

His face broke out into a grin. "You won't regret it, Lana. You're going to have fans from all over. I mean, you already do have fans from all over—but that sort of happens when you kill a serial
"I'm not French," Lana deadpanned. She leaned back, crossing her arms as she studied the numbers on the card. "Fine—fine. I'll call him and talk to him. Thank you, Walter."

"By the way," he interrupted, "I heard you were in the hospital. Is that true?"

"Who told you that?"

"My wife's niece is a candy striper. She told us you were at the hospital, but you had your sister with you. I didn't know you had a sister—well, not around here, anyway."

Lana inclined her eyebrows. "It was Sister Mary Eunice. Somehow it got confused. We decided not to correct them." Walter's big eyes weren't sated by her half-assed explanation, so she delved a little deeper. "I had a minor surgery. It wasn't a big deal. So I would appreciate if it didn't hit the newspaper, if you don't mind." Her teeth clenched as her jaw set; she didn't trust Walt any farther than she could throw him, especially when it came to which stories he would run.

He held up his hands in a surrender position. "Okay, okay. Look, I'm your friend first, boss second. I do really want to make sure you're okay." Lana hummed noncommittally as she checked her watch again. He paused, lips quirking into a frown. "Do you have another appointment or something? I don't want to keep you."

Lana shook her head. "No—I have to pick up Sister Mary Eunice from church by twelve. She had a meeting with a priest. I don't want to be late." She pocketed her watch. "Sorry."

"How did you get stuck babysitting a nun, anyway?"

"I'm not babysitting. She's my friend." Walter's skeptical look sent Lana's belly tumbling about into waves of distaste, and her lips pushed down into a scowl. "I volunteered to care for her while the church waits to reassign her. It was my choice. Do you have something against me having a friend?"

"When that friend is a nun and you're, uh, not exactly a housewife, then, yeah, I have a little something against it." Walter crunched through a big bite on his sandwich. He chewed with his mouth open. The tip of Lana's nose crinkled. Men are gross. "Look," he mumbled around his mouthful of food, "I wasn't exactly surprised about the whole woman thing. I knew there had to be a reason you ignored me when I hit on you for, like, three years." She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Maybe I just didn't like you? "But you're already on the hot seat—you're losing a lot of allies—I'm just saying, a nun isn't the most likely person to be supportive of your antics."

Grinding her teeth, Lana pinched herself in the thigh to measure her breaths. Antics? Is that what love is to you? "Mary Eunice and I have discussed it. It isn't something that comes between us. I trust my own judge of character well enough." She tucked the card of the publisher into her purse, fidgeting where she sat. Can I leave yet?

"Of course you do," Walter soothed. He licked his fingers, and Lana grimaced, but it vanished when he fixed her under a patronizing look. "Just be careful, Lana. It's not a safe place to live anymore, especially for someone like you. I want you to be safe. You're my big story." He winked, thinking himself quite clever. "Can't have any more serial killers snatching you up."
Lana wanted to take the top bun off of the peanut butter sandwich and squelch it in his face, but, knowing she had to pick up Mary Eunice and couldn't afford to post bail after killing her boss via allergic reaction to peanut butter, she folded down the top of the brown paper bag. "Thanks, Walt. I've got to go. I've got a book to write."

He smirked. "And a nun to pick up from church, apparently." He wiped his mouth with his napkin and lifted a hand in farewell. "Keep safe, keep in touch. Say—drop off your first column next Thursday? Does that work?"

"Sure. Goodbye." He kept talking to her, but she turned her back and crossed the street to her car before he could pursue her. She climbed inside and cranked it up, rolling out into the road; she spotted Walter in the rearview mirror, waving at her, sandwich spilling out of his gaping mouth. She had no qualms against leaving him in her wake.

The meeting had offered only one benefit—it squelched her fears of something terrible happening to Mary Eunice. No one would burst into the church guns blazing with intentions of murdering some nun who didn't even belong to the church. "You're being irrational," she told herself aloud as she sped down the road, five miles over the speed limit; she slammed to a stop at each sign and revved the car again once the path was clear. "And you're going to be ten minutes early. Better than ten minutes late." She didn't know how long the priest was going to take; she didn't want to wait in the car indefinitely. But she also didn't want to leave Mary Eunice standing around the church like an awkward ghost locked in purgatory.

As she rolled into the church parking lot, she spotted the black-clad figure beside a young man—too close to him. She parked the car and turned to look out the window at Mary Eunice, but she hadn't moved from where the man held her, one hand upon her elbow, one pinching her breast. Fuck, no. Lana grabbed her umbrella from the floor of the car and raced across the lot.

"Hey!" she snarled. She drew herself up tall, but the slow procession wouldn't work; the man hadn't budged from where he thrust his lips into Mary Eunice's face, the nun cringing away from him. A sneer donned upon her lips, but her heart thrashed madly as she wielded the umbrella like a baseball bat. She dashed to the couple and brought the umbrella down on the boy's arm. "Back off! Leave her alone!"

"Ow! What the fuck?" He recoiled and covered his face with one hand. "We're just fucking around! What's your problem?"

Lana bared her teeth and jabbed the umbrella out at him. "It's not fucking around when she's crying." He tried to dodge around Lana, lunging at Mary Eunice, but she snapped the umbrella back. "Don't touch her if you know what's good for you." Her chest constricted, vines of panic wrapping around it, and her surgical scar smarted from the exertion, but she didn't dare buckle, even as her tongue shivered in her mouth. The boy shot her a baleful look, disbelieving. "Sister, are you alright?" Lana peered over her shoulder out of the corner of her eye.

Mary Eunice had fat tears rolling down her cheeks, and she wiped them with both hands, streaking her makeup. A series of jerky nods followed. "I'm o-okay," she stammered. "This is some bullshit." The boy attempted to grab at Mary Eunice again, but Lana jabbed the umbrella at the center of his chest. "Hey—you're that faggot from the news."

"Don't call her that!" Both Lana and the boy looked back at Mary Eunice with equal surprise at her interruption, but in spite of her quivering mouth, she had mirrored Lana's stance, hands drawn into fists and ready to strike if he grabbed her again. Yes! Fight back, for the love of god!

The boy snorted first. "You're real brave when you've got a fag with an umbrella—Get out of my
way, cunt." Lana lifted the umbrella upward to the base of his throat. "Fuck you!"

"If you try to grab her one more time, I swear to god we will beat your ass, and you will be on the front page of the newspaper as the pantywaist who got his ass kicked by a nun and a dyke with an umbrella." The boy paused as he considered Lana's threat, both hands up as he backed away. You fucking nitwit. You pathetic waste of space. Lana's fingers trembled on the handle of the umbrella. She couldn't remember the last time she had shaken so badly, so uncontrollably. I could've been later. I could still be with Walter. That part scared her the most, that in another world she had not left early, or she had been in a car accident, or she had simply driven more slowly, and the boy's hands were under Mary Eunice's habit instead of on top of it, tasting her breath instead of smelling it, flicking her nipples instead of groping her breast.

The door to the church swung open. "Kenneth!" The priest grabbed the young man by the upper arm and pinched hard; the boy writhed in his grip but could not escape. "What are you doing?"

He regarded the two women with dark eyes, landing on Mary Eunice. "Sister?"

Lana lowered the umbrella and wiped her sweaty upper lip with her index finger. "He was groping her," she muttered, scowling at the boy. Part of her wanted to lay into him, to thrash him until he was not capable of ever hurting another woman. Mary Eunice nodded; her habit was in disarray, coif beginning to fall off.

Father Joseph glowered at Kenneth. "Would you like me to call the police?" he asked Mary Eunice; the boy blanched, all of the courage leaking from him. Yes! Call the police! Show the little fucker! But Lana placed her teeth on top of her tongue and glanced back at Mary Eunice. It wasn't her decision. And Mary Eunice shook her head. Her tight fists relaxed as she shuffled closer to Lana. "Are you sure?" She nodded. His lips flattened into a line. "I'm terribly sorry about this. Kenneth, I am calling your mother."

They entered the church, for a long moment, silence followed except for the dull sound of dry autumn leaves scraping the cement of the parking lot. Lana's mouth couldn't form words. It shook too hard. Mary Eunice pressed a cold hand to the inside of her forearm. "I told you to wait inside." It sounded like an accusation, and she regretted it the moment she said it.

Mary Eunice closed her eyes. "I was—he was inside—he said he just needed a smoke—he was friendly—" She gulped audibly; she had thick streaks where her tears had mussed her makeup. "I'm sorry—I should've listened to you."

Lana shook her head. "I didn't mean that. It's not your fault, I just…" She saw it in her head again, Mary Eunice's head at the barrel of a gun, exploding in a red mist. You're being stupid. She rested her hand over Mary Eunice's. "I was worried about you." She rolled the hand beneath her fingertips, warming it. "Let's go to the car."

They walked to the car in silence, Lana limping, knuckles white where she clenched the umbrella, and Mary Eunice scampering after in her short, quick steps. Once they had crawled into the station wagon, Lana placed her hands on the steering wheel, but she hadn't cranked the car. "You're shaking," Mary Eunice observed, voice soft. Lana attempted to calm her rapid breathing and pulse. "Lana?" Mary Eunice reached for her.

"I—I'm fine." She leaned back in the seat. He could've killed you. He could've done anything to you. "Are you—god, are you okay?" Mary Eunice folded into a delicate hug, and Lana smoothed a hand over the top of her head, adjusting the crooked coif. She sniffled a few times; Lana wiped her tears from her cheeks with her trembling fingers, but she almost poked Mary Eunice in the eye, sending them both into a hysterical fit of mingled tears and giggles. "I'm sorry. I can't stop shaking." She licked her upper lip. "I swear—I had just convinced myself that no one would hurt you at a church, and I get there, and there's this motherfucker—"
Mary Eunice clutched her hand, trying to calm its ferocious shivers. Her body was warm, but the habit smelled like dust and cigarette smoke. Lana slipped an arm around her shoulders and tugged her in for an intimate embrace. It put pressure on her abdomen, but she didn't care. *You're safe. That's what's important. I still have you.* Mary Eunice's soft voice croaked, "Lana?"

"Mhm?"

"Thank you." She buried her face in the crook of Lana's neck where it rested most comfortably at night, eyelashes on skin, and Lana resisted the urge to turn her head and press a kiss to the delicate skin. She had slipped earlier, had broken, and she did not regret it, but she could not make a habit of it. One blue eye peeked up at Lana, a weepy smile upon her face. "I love you."

Lana released the pent breath in her lungs; she didn't know when she had sucked it in, but as it escaped, black blots dotted her vision. *I love you, too.* The confession did not come easily to her, so instead, she smoothed down the crinkled fabric of her habit, the best communication she knew to offer. She flicked off some cigarette butts from the front of Mary Eunice's habit. "Were you smoking?"

A giggle escaped Mary Eunice, and she sat up. "No—" She shook her head. "He was smoking—he did that on purpose—god, I'm such an idiot. I thought he was nice."

"You're not an idiot." Lana raised her eyebrows, but the hysteria dominated again, breaking her face into a misplaced smirk. "I mean, if I were wearing a habit, I would assume no one would want to hit on me. It's like a wedding ring, but, like, better."

Mary Eunice leaned back in the seat, and the soft smile, almost nostalgic, clung to her face like a tight shirt. Her belly rumbled aloud. "Can we go home now?"

When home had become the understood term, meaning *Lana's house,* neither of them were certain, but the building had more love in it than any other place Mary Eunice had lived, so it earned the term. Lana picked up the brown paper bag from the floor of the car. "We could go have a picnic in the park," she offered instead. "Since you packed enough food for a small army, and no one can kill an appetite like my boss."

The soft smile brightened, eyes glowing, and Mary Eunice nodded. "That sounds great."

"Picnic, it is."
In the evening, after Lana had finished another chapter of her book and Mary Eunice had prepared dinner and they both had showered, Lana stretched out on the sofa, watching the news, listening for anything she could cover in a column. Mary Eunice hummed in the kitchen, cleaning up after herself. Lana glanced over her shoulder. "Do you need some help in there?"

"No, I'm fine." In spite of the negative response, Lana turned off the television and headed into the kitchen. "You don't have to—really, I don't mind." The dishes soaked in soapy water while Mary Eunice wiped off the counters with a wet washcloth.

"I promise I won't set anything on fire." Lana grinned at her when Mary Eunice ducked her head, and she went to the sink to start on the dishes. "You should teach me how to cook something. You've got to get tired of slaving in the kitchen hours a day."

Mary Eunice shrugged. "I like to cook." She took the broom from the corner and began to sweep up the linoleum, the crunchy stuff compiling into a sand dune. "At any rate, it's better than dying of smoke inhalation." Her eyes took a mischievous glint as she looked up at Lana, nervous, seeking approval; Lana chuckled, if only to reassure her. "It gives me something to do."

Lana dried the dishes one by one and put them away; the rhythm of scrubbing calmed her from the day's events, Mary Eunice's presence offering a tranquility when her subconscious prickled from revisiting her memories of Thredson. Thredson, before she knew he was Bloody Face: helping her, drugging her into vomiting while she gazed at Wendy's picture in an attempt to cure her and free her. He had already killed Wendy by then. He had already taken the teeth from her skull and frozen her body after he desecrated it with his manhood—for Wendy, like Lana, had never allowed a man to touch her.

He hovered behind her eyelids, and her grip tightened upon the glass she grasped, waiting for him to fade, as if he would ever fade, as if she could ever banish him. Her eyes fluttered shut, and he crept closer, wreathing around her neck, choking her. Something brushed against her hand. She gasped and jerked upright with a short cry; Mary Eunice flinched in surprise at her outburst. The glass slipped out of Lana's wet hand and shattered upon the floor. "Oh shit—I'm so sorry—"

Lana's voice was dry, and she gulped to attempt to wet her tongue.

She staggered back from the mess. Mary Eunice reached to steady her, a hand on her waist. "It's okay. I got it." The vision hadn't stopped; a gun fired in her mind, and Thredson's head exploded, but then she heard it again and Wendy's head vanished into a mist, and then it happened to Mary Eunice, crossing memory with reality in a jumbled haze. She swayed, fighting to ground herself. "Be careful—" Mary Eunice could not save her from stepping into the mess of glass on the floor; all of her plucking hands could not support Lana's sagging body.

The pain pierced her dreams. "Goddamn," she hissed, recoiling. Spatters of blood dribbled onto the tile like red paint. "I'm sorry." The apologies flipped off of her tongue. *I promised not to set anything on fire, but this must be a damn close second.*
"Don't move." With her broom, Mary Eunice summoned the glass into a pile and banished it to the corner before she delicately stepped over it, searching for more shards with her bare feet, hoping she didn't find them. Under the sink, she sought her dustpan, and she swept the glistening shards into the pan and dumped them into the trash. Lana clutched the countertop for support, unable to place her injured foot on the ground; pathetic dribbles of blood ran down her sole like tears. Mary Eunice stood and offered both hands to Lana. "Hold onto me."

Lana grabbed onto her and managed to hop back to the sofa. She wrapped her foot in the throw on the back of the couch to keep from dribbling all over the cushions. Mary Eunice returned with the first aid kit. "I'm sorry," Lana stammered again. "I didn't mean—"

Mary Eunice shushed her, and she felt quite like a child as she quieted. "Are you okay?" Other than slicing my foot open, yes, I'm peachy. Lana bit her tongue to keep from hurling the sarcastic remark at the undeserving Mary Eunice. "You get that look on your face when you remember." The quiet observation stung Lana. Could she hide nothing? "You're shaking."

"I'm aware!" Lana snapped, and Mary Eunice didn't press her, soothing her wound in hydrogen peroxide. The fizzing burbled loud enough for Lana to hear it. But the silence between them was heavy. Lana closed her eyes. "I don't mean to snarl."

"It's okay—"

"No, it's not, you don't deserve that." Lana swallowed hard and dropped her gaze to the floor, her broken toenails. Mary Eunice wrapped her foot in gauze; Lana nearly expected her to suggest a trip to the hospital, to which she would readily respond that she could only accept stitches in one part of her body at a time.

Once she finished wrapping the foot, Mary Eunice looked back to Lana. "Was it something I did?" Lana held her gaze, bewilderment paralyzing her tongue. "I would like to not do it again, if I can help—"

"It isn't you," Lana rushed to reassure. She reached to take one of Mary Eunice's hands in her own trembling fingers. "I thought you would make it better—but I just—it's me—I can't stop it—" Her words didn't make sense, so she stopped using them, swallowing hard until she knew she could hold a steady thought. "It's easier when you're close."

A frown bowed Mary Eunice's lips like a bushed eyebrow. "What can I do?" She always offered herself to Lana like some sort of servant, desperate to give aid, to remedy the pain. "If you need me, you can always ask. I'll come to you. I want you to feel safe."

I know. I don't want to rely on you. You are not my security blanket. You are not my teddy bear. Lana swallowed the words. "Thank you." The lips pursed at her in a plea she would not voice, but Lana could read it on her face, yearning for something else, something to busy her hands and offer aid. The imploring expression drove Lana to seek the embrace that she would otherwise denied, arms open, and Mary Eunice provided, gentle, not jarring, and warm. She's always so warm. She rested her chin on Mary Eunice's shoulder.

Mary Eunice held her until she pulled away, and then she held Lana's gaze, earnest and seeking. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Help me up." They locked hands, and Mary Eunice tugged her up onto her feet; the bandaged one smarted, but while she winced, she didn't falter. "I'm going to clean up."

"I got it—you don't have to—"
"It's my mess."

"But you still shouldn't be bending over. I can get it." In a battle of wills, Lana knew she would inevitably win; Mary Eunice didn't have a stubborn bone in her body. But the thought of groveling around on the ground with a sliced foot and healing stomach didn't appeal to her, and as she allowed the shadow of doubt to cross her face, Mary Eunice recognized the small victory and said, "I'll be done in a few minutes."

Mary Eunice reentered the kitchen with a soft sigh, leaving Lana in the living room. *Stupid.* She had known something was wrong as soon as Lana came to her—it wasn't like Lana to shadow her during her chores, and she had that empty, soulless look on her face, where her eyes went vacant, like she saw into a different dimension and lost all awareness of her surroundings. *It's because she's writing that book.* Every time Lana revisited her past to write about Bloody Face, her face grew a little more haunted. Each scene became a nightmare, and nothing Mary Eunice did could change it to a more pleasant dream.

But Lana needed to write her book, the same way Mary Eunice needed to pray, the same way they both bit their fingernails down to the quick in faulty attempts to stifle their anxieties. *And I'm going to be here as long as she needs me.* She was guaranteed at least five months with Lana, as long as she was seeing Father Joseph. She dropped onto her knees in the kitchen and began to mop up the blood on the floor with a paper towel; once she had removed most of it, she applied her homemade bleach spray and wiped the surface clean. A strong, chemical scent permeated the air. *Is that the bleach?* It didn't smell like bleach.

Tucking the bleach spray back under the sink, she peered into the living room, where Lana had stretched out on the couch with a bottle of blue fingernail polish, trying and failing to reach her toes; no matter how she contorted, she strained her incision, a hand flying to her abdomen and face cringing with the pain. *Oh, goodness.* Mary Eunice's teeth snatched her lower lip and picked at the scabby surface there. "Do you want me—"

"No." At the sharp note to Lana's voice, Mary Eunice chuckled in spite of herself, a pressed smile hiding her exhale of breath, but it did not fool Lana, who shot her a baleful look. "Don't laugh at me. I can do it." In one great twist, she rolled off of the edge of the couch and grappled for the cushions to support herself.

Mary Eunice sat on the opposite end of the couch and offered Lana a hand to help her struggle back up onto the couch cushions; she had dripped nail polish on the front of her pajamas. "I'll do yours, and then you can do mine?" she suggested. Eyes narrow, Lana's lips fell into a thin line; she scanned Mary Eunice's face for some hint of betrayal, and though she did not form the question, Mary Eunice provided, "It doesn't bother me. You're the only one who ever sees my feet. I don't think God minds."

The line of Lana's lips quirked into an inadvertent smile, like the expression occurred without her consent; a teasing irritation laced her voice as she replied, "Why are you always right?" Mary Eunice blinked, taken aback by the accusation, and she bit down on the tip of her tongue to stifle the apology budding there. Lana didn't like it when she apologized all the time, but for Mary Eunice, accepting the blame was a preservatory reflex, something she struggled against. "You first. Give me those toes. I won't let you chicken out."

She blushed at Lana's words, the tips of her ears burning. Lifting her legs, she turned to face Lana. *Maybe I shouldn't.* But Lana tugged one of Mary Eunice's feet into her lap. Many years had passed since she had last had her nails painted, probably on some night with Molly when the radio had nothing interesting to say and they were tired of reading books and it was too cold to go outside. Lana's hands carried a visible quiver, a remnant of her fading flashbacks, but the creases on her smile promised her presence.
Lana peeked up at her with a shadow of mischief upon her lips, smile becoming a smirk. *Uh-oh.* Mary Eunice tensed. *What's she doing?* Lana's index finger trailed up the sole of the pale foot. The shrill of a giggle bubbled at her lips while her toes curled. "I knew it. I knew you would be ticklish!" The finger grazed back down her foot. Mary Eunice covered her mouth to keep from laughing again and squirmed in her seat. "I knew it."

"Please, don't—" She strained to release the words as her whole body erupted into goosebumps. The soft skin of Lana's hands evoked shudders through her, like ice dropped down the back of her shirt. A warmth pooled in her lower abdomen, not uncomfortable but foreign in its nature. Her heart flailed in the hollowness of her chest.

But at her pinched instruction, Lana ceased her playful ministrations, a tender look coming upon her brown eyes; it resembled the heady, wanton gaze Barb had placed her under, but instead of predatory flames underlyng, Lana had the friendly foundation. *She really is a good friend.* "Okay, I'm sorry. Hold still—you don't have to wiggle. I'm done, I promise." Lana spread out Mary Eunice toes between her fingers and, clutching the brush of the nail polish between two white-knuckled fingers, smeared the first stroke upon Mary Eunice's big toe.

The azure tone glowed with slick wetness. "I like this color. It matches your eyes." Lana exhaled across the first wet toenail. "It was Wendy's favorite."

*Wendy.* Mary Eunice's tongue ran across the scabby place on her lower lip as she reflect on Father Joseph's advice earlier; the pleasant, foreign feeling Lana had given her promptly vanished into a sick, cold dread in her tummy. *I need to talk to her.* Nervousness quelled inside her, drawing her face into a pensive pinch.

Where do I start?

She didn't recognize the meek hum as her own when it emerged. "Could you, maybe, tell me about her? A little bit—if you want to." She ducked her head, averting her eyes, but Father Joseph's words rang through her mind in a chime like a church bell, "Sometimes the person mourning feels as if they are the only one who remembers. As if they're the only one who ever speaks the name." And Lana's ogling expression reflected the exact sentiment, the shock at Mary Eunice's proposition. "You don't have to—I don't mean to pry."

"No, it's fine." A wrinkle appeared on Lana's forehead where she hadn't had one before, thoughtful and contemplative while she painted Mary Eunice's toenails. Her following silence made Mary Eunice itch. *You shouldn't have said anything. Now she's upset. Stupid stupid stupid.* But then Lana began to speak, and Mary Eunice's hateful inner voice quieted to listen.

"I met Wendy at a church festival when we were ten. She and her family had just moved into the area, and we didn't have a Catholic church—it was a really small community. I had never met another girl who liked baseball before. She had baseball cards. We were instantly best friends. She fit right in with us. Our dads worked together at the sawmill, and in the summer, our moms would gang up on us kids. Wendy had three brothers and three sisters. It took two to tackle all of them, and Timothy and Roger—my brothers—they never helped. Obnoxious little brats."

Lana didn't lift her gaze from Mary Eunice's feet, but Mary Eunice watched her in earnest, mouth a sympathetic frown. She knew how this story ended, no matter how happy its beginning. "We lived in the woods—the kind of place that the people from the boonies call the sticks. There was a big creek and an overhang where we would all play as kids, jumping into the water, and there were some boulders to climb out on." Lana wore a reminiscent smile. "That was where we kissed for the first time, when we were seventeen. We had already prepared to go to college; we both had our dreams, and none of them entailed getting married at nineteen and having a brood of children. But we knew, then, that we had to get away, sooner rather than later."
"It's funny, now, to think about it, because I fought it longer than she did. We found a small apartment while we were in college, and Wendy would hide her face when she went out with her friends, and I tried dating men. It was a bad idea. Men are gross. They smell gross." Lana inclined an eyebrow as she chuckled, shaking her head. "The only guy I ever kissed was this backwoods hick from Maine, and he grew a full, ugly Icelandic beard. It was so scratchy and uncomfortable when he kissed me. It was like wearing a really itchy wool on your face. I knew, then, I couldn't handle it—I couldn't marry someone with itchy wool on his face, or make love to him."

In spite of herself, Mary Eunice broke her reverie with a quiet jest. "You could've asked him to shave."

Lana squinted at her, analyzing her face, and Mary Eunice feared she had spoken out of turn, the hateful inner voice already resurfacing with its snarls like a belt in the hand of a father she had never known, but then Lana's lips curved upward. An abashed tint touched her cheeks. "It's not just the hair—I mean, I definitely couldn't deal with the hair, but that's beside the point."

Is she embarrassed? Lana didn't blush often, unlike Mary Eunice, who found herself warming with embarrassment more often than she prayed her rosary. "Women are soft. They have soft bodies, soft skin, soft faces. Soft eyes. Wendy had beautiful eyes." The pad of Lana's index finger rested on the knuckle of Mary Eunice's big toe. She had finished one foot and hadn't started on the next. "Men aren't like that. They're rough and loud. They make noise when they walk, when they eat—they speak too loudly—they guffaw and chew with their mouths open, and they expect their wives to clean up after them."

She lifted her eyes to Mary Eunice, dark and intense. "A lot of them come to take what they want. Even if it's wearing a habit and married to God—they don't care. They'll wreck what they want and crawl back into their self-entitlement and ignore the devastation in their wake." Mary Eunice's throat bobbed with a tight swallow, remembering the painful pinch of a stranger's fingers into the side of her breast, the bruise his meaty fingers had left behind. "I've never met a woman who could destroy things as carelessly as a man."

Lana shifted Mary Eunice's foot in her lap and dropped her gaze there, smearing the brush up the edge of her toenail once more. "We became partners after that—after I tried to be normal. But Wendy was always more shy than me. She didn't want to own it." Lana licked her lips; the lower one jutted out into a slight pout. "Even after we graduated, and she got her job, and we moved here. Hell, the job made it worse. She had so much to lose. She would make sure all the blinds were closed before she kissed me—She only let us make love in the dark. She loved her students so much. She wanted to make a difference in their lives."

Her words ceased, broken but not unfinished, and her chest hitched with her next breath, strangling the tears glimmering in her eyes. Don't cry, I didn't mean to make you cry. Mary Eunice leaned forward; she wanted to offer some comfort. I'm sorry. "Jude came in here and bullied her until she signed the paperwork to have me committed. I can only imagine how scared she was, that evening, when she realized I hadn't come home."

Lana shook her head, and her hands trembled with such force, she pulled back from Mary Eunice's feet to keep from dripping nail polish on them. "She couldn't go to the police. She must've thought something terrible had happened to me. And then Jude—blackmailed her. Convinced her she would never enter a classroom again if she had me freed." Her throat bobbed when she gulped. Everything downcast called to Mary Eunice, to her inner caregiver who cried for her to offer some comfort. "She didn't have a choice. She was scared. Jude manipulated her. It wasn't her fault."

"What would you have done?" Lana's eyes fluttered wide with the quiet question, not posed with aggression but still confrontational in the furrowing of Mary Eunice's brow. She bit her tongue the
moment she asked it. "I didn't mean—You don't have to answer that, I'm sorry." Make her feel worse, why don't you? You're an idiot.

"I would have busted her the fuck out of there, to hell with the consequences. There are no consequences more important to me than Wendy was." Lana had lost a single weepy tear from her watery eyes, filled to the brim and glossy. "But it wasn't the same for her. Wendy loved teaching the same way I love writing. No one could take away my writing. Anyone could walk into this house and see us and take away her life forever." She picked at the hem of her shirt, distracted by a string, or perhaps avoiding Mary Eunice's gaze. "I had to convince myself not to be angry with her," she admitted. "It's hard—I wanted to be furious—but I couldn't be, not after what happened to her."

Lana screwed the cap back onto the bottle of nail polish, and Mary Eunice placed her feet back on the ground, toes spread out. "I try to remember her the way I knew her best. She was faithful and ambitious and reliable. She loved me—she was the only one who ever did." Her eyes closed, mouth twisting. No, no... Mary Eunice scooted closer and placed an arm around Lana's shoulders, her skin cool to the touch. At the embrace, Lana curled close. "But sometimes I can't remember the sound of her voice—" She choked around the words; Mary Eunice dashed away the tears with her thumb as they fell, but the pace increased. "And we've washed the smell of her perfume out of most of our clothes."

Mary Eunice touched the curve of her jaw. "I'm sorry, Lana." She braced herself for the words she would say, the aftermath they could bring. A guilty conscience cannot heal. The apology would not sate her completely, but perhaps it would allow her nearer to the spiritual reprieve she sought. "I should have never let you into Briarcliff." Lana's eyelids flicked up to look at her when she released the words, surprised at her intrusion. "If I had been strong enough to turn you away—to face Sister Jude—none of this would have happened. Thredson would never have known you. You could have gone home. You could be here with her now, instead of me." She toyed with a strand of Lana's hair, unable to maintain eye contact, to face the blame there. "I am so sorry. I would do anything to give her back to you."

To her surprise, Lana didn't twist away and rebuke her. One of her cold hands bumped Mary Eunice's chin, lifting her face, seeking eye contact, which Mary Eunice granted reluctantly. "It isn't your fault."

The assuredness of her voice sent a tingling down Mary Eunice's spine, absent of the crying shiver. I know you think that. You always know what to say. But I wish I could change it. As if interrupting her thoughts, Lana cut in, "No, listen to me. I know when you look like that—" Lana pinched her chin, not painful but not pleasant. "Thredson had been stalking me for weeks. He already knew where I lived. He was coming for me, regardless of anything you did. He wanted me. What happened to us—it would have happened anyway, under different circumstances, maybe here in this house."

Mouth dry and flavorless, Mary Eunice echoed, "Stalking?"

Lana nodded. Her thumb trailed over Mary Eunice's lower lip. She smells like shampoo. "It was the story. He knew I wanted to tell his story." She isn't looking at me anymore. Lana's dark eyes had focused on the curve of Mary Eunice's lips. The pad of the single digit hovering there made her belly stir. "It was always the story. Me and my goddamned idiotic story." She dropped her hand, and Mary Eunice missed it, wanted to catch it and hold it there on her face. "I killed the love of my life for a story."

The words stung Mary Eunice like a cane over her rump, but unlike Lana, she had no immediate answer except a stammered, "N-No." Her belly seized into a nervous squelch. Give me courage and, possibly, if it's merited, a shred of eloquence. Lana had silver on the tip of her tongue and
spun words like silk. She is everything I am not. Make me a better friend to her. She swallowed the tangle of despair under her tongue and fought for a stern tone, for an authority that would gain Lana's attention.

"You can't blame yourself. That's just destructive. Nothing good will come of it." Mary Eunice bridled her small supply of intrepidity when Lana's brows quirked together and she faced her once again, astonishment scrawled upon her wide eyes when Mary Eunice managed to sound less like a servant addressing a master and more like a teacher addressing a student. "Wendy wouldn't want you to be angry with yourself. She wouldn't want you to feel guilty. It isn't your fault." Has anyone ever told her this before?

Tears shimmered in Lana's eyes, all chocolate and warm, like a mug of steaming coffee. But a smile wriggled upon her pink lips, almost misplaced. "You're always quiet and complacent," Lana observed, "until someone threatens something you care about." She leaned back into Mary Eunice's body, gazing upward at the ceiling until the tears had ebbed in her eyes; she gulped the lump in her throat. "Then you find your inner bitch—mama bear—whatever, let her take the reins."

A heavy sigh passed from her parted lips, nose still too snotty to manage a breath. "You're fierce when you say something like that. When you told off that bad doctor, or when that gross guy called me a name. You look like you're ready to kick some ass if anybody dares contradict you." Oh, goodness. The tips of Mary Eunice's ears warmed, and she averted her eyes as the blush crawled across her face. "And—look, it's gone now. You're going back into your shell."

"My reservoir of courage is more like a puddle," Mary Eunice mumbled. Lana laughed aloud, white teeth dancing in the dim lamplight, at the analogy, and when the joy spread across her face, Mary Eunice pushed a little farther. "See me again next time it rains." She reached for the bottle of fingernail polish and took one of Lana's feet while Lana stifled her laughter into her palm. Her eyes crinkled at the edges; a particular light came to them, to the line of her brows, to the laugh lines beside her lips, which made her all the more beautiful. I see God in Lana's face.

It was strange that, in all her life, Mary Eunice did not think she had ever seen God in someone else before. Perhaps in Father William, who had saved her from her family and brought her to salvation, or in James's newborn face when she had held him for the first time after Aunt Celest gave birth, or in Pepper on occasion—though she never allowed herself to linger on the thought of seeing God in anyone who had committed infanticide. But in Lana, it was the strongest, the most divine thing she had ever seen. Any statue or sacred material paled in comparison.

"You're funny." Lana had quieted now, foot pointing outward; Mary Eunice didn't tease her in spite of the temptation to draw her index finger over the sole. Lana had short toes, the tops of them browned by sunburn scarring. Her smallest toe had curled under at the knuckle; she couldn't see any nail on it. "I always skip that one. I broke it when I was a kid. It never healed right."

"You didn't go to a doctor?"

Lana snorted. "Tim and I were playing war, and I stole my daddy's gun." What? Mary Eunice's eyes stretched wide. "Oh, don't look like that. It wasn't loaded. I wasn't about to go killing anybody. I just wanted to win against Tim. Anyway, we ran down to the creek. I dropped the gun down the drop-off, onto the rocks, and as I was climbing down to get it, one of the boulders rolled over onto my foot. We were so afraid of Daddy finding out we'd been playing with the gun, we never told him or Mama. I was limping for weeks."

Once she had painted all of Lana's toenails, they watched the new episode of Bonanza, which Mary Eunice suspected Lana enjoyed far more than she did; every time she tried to listen to the dialogue, her awareness wandered back to the warm curve of Lana's body on hers, the smell of
her hair which became stronger as the stinging scent of polish faded. *I love her so much.* The love she held for Lana settled in the hollow parts of her chest and filled her to the brim, to bursting.

As a nun and a servant of God, Mary Eunice found her calling in love—love of the world around her, of the people within it, of all creation. And she had never struggled to love. She poured herself into her work until she was empty. But the love she gave Lana never made her feel empty. It didn't deplete her. When she gave it, it swelled to accommodate unlike any love she had ever given in the past.

Lana toyed with Mary Eunice's hand. She trailed her index finger along the rough callouses on the palm, and Mary Eunice gazed down at the contact, at the rubbing of skin on skin, the hypnotic waves it elicited. The dull throb of exhaustion pulsed behind her eyes. Her head lolled onto Lana's shoulder, and she started to sit up. "I'm sorry—"

With the mumble, Lana shifted, hand extending to settle around her shoulders. "Come here, sleepyhead." *Sleepyhead.* Mary Eunice ducked her head, smiling at the pet name, and allowed herself to relax into Lana's embrace. *I am an indulgent fool.* But she did not fight herself. Lana had invited her, and she would not reject the gift. Lana toyed with her hair, wrapping it around her finger and tugging and then unraveling it.

Mary Eunice reclined there until *Bonanza* had ended, eyes half-closed, blinking after the horses galloping across the screen. "I always thought horses were kind of scary," she admitted in a tired whisper as she sat up, leaving the draped warmth of Lana's arm around her shoulders. Lana looked down at her. "I mean—I only saw real ones in parades and stuff. They were bigger than they look on TV. Big eyes. Big hoofs."

As she stood, Lana shrugged. "I'm from hick town. Everybody there had horses. I never cared for them. They smell."

After they brushed their teeth and went to bed, Mary Eunice left the light on to read her Bible while Lana lay down, staring at the ceiling, waiting for her to finish her quiet study. She turned to one of the bookmarked passages. "What do the bookmarks mean?" Lana asked, one arched eyebrow peering down at the simple Bible, marred in margins by Mary Eunice's curving script underlining passages and remarking upon them.

"I tab all the parts I like the best, so I'm able to read them when I need hope or guidance." Mary Eunice trailed one finger over the passage she had selected for tonight's reading, First Corinthians. "This isn't the same version I learned when I was a girl, but it means the same thing."

Lana pursed her lips as her eyes roamed the handwriting and the circled text. "Do you need guidance on love?" In spite of the innocence of the question, Mary Eunice's face grew hot; her teeth went to grab the scab of her lower lip, and when she caught herself, her hand picked at the spot on her arm. It was a simple question, but with Mary Eunice's sporadic leaping heart and reddening cheeks, Lana redacted it. "I don't mean to pry—I know it's personal."

"No, I—" Swallowing the thickness in the back of her throat, Mary Eunice looked down at the words. *I need to remind myself there's nothing sinful about loving you as much as I do.* "I seek guidance on all things—all the fruits of the spirit. I think love comes most easily to me, but I still need to be reminded how it works, sometimes." *I love as I am called to love.* It had never felt so good before, but the words on the page reminded her of the power. *Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.* *Love never fails."

"Your spirit seems perfectly fruity to me." As Mary Eunice chuckled, Lana lay back on the pillows. "I think I had a little too much wine at dinner."
"You had a soda," Mary Eunice reminded her in a hum, but Lana's weak joke had not sated her insides; they leapt into a nervous bundle. "I used to find all of the fruits of the spirit easy to come by. They were there, if I prayed for them." Lana's soft eyes burned where their gaze fell on her cheek like lasers, carving their imprint upon her skin while she listened with rapt attention. "But now I struggle, sometimes, to accomplish all of those things. I am not as—as fruitful as I was before, as I would like to be." She resisted the urge to look at Lana instead of her Bible; she had the blankets folded over her chest, arms stuck underneath them to protect against the chilly air. "I think it's easiest if I start with what I know best and build from there."

"That makes sense." Lana rolled onto her side, facing Mary Eunice, one arm sprawled under the pillow and the other resting beside her on top of the covers, palm down but open. "You don't have to get it all back at once." Her advice had a gentle tone. "Think of it like weight loss. You do it slowly and steadily, and one day, in several months or a year, you look back on how far you've come, and you realize you were making progress the whole time, even if it didn't always seem that way." Mary Eunice's brows quirked. She understood the analogy to an extent, though she had never struggled to lose weight. Under her befuddled gaze, Lana chuckled. "I was a chubby kid. I worked it off in high school."

She closed her eyes. "Do you want me to turn off the light?" Mary Eunice asked.

"No, take your time. I'm fine."

As Lana settled, Mary Eunice browsed the section of text she had chosen, reading it and rereading it. "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." Her tongue flitted across her lips, listening to Lana's soft breath; she hadn't fallen asleep yet, chest still rhythmical, eyes flitting under the closed lids. But while Mary Eunice allowed the verse to ruminate, she turned to the next chapter of First Corinthians.

Scanning the gospel, processing it, left her hands free and shoulders aching from stooping to read the small text. She remembered the sensation of Lana toying with her hair while they watched the television together. Should I? The dark chestnut of Lana's hair was a temptation unlike any of the things they warned about in church; it did not lead her to sin. It did not make her feel wrong. Her soul had so many stains now, but when she touched Lana, she was dipped in bleach, white and clean once again. Lana made her feel pure. If it was sin, it was well disguised.

Her hand combed over the soft hair, still damp from the shower, and she brushed it behind Lana's ear; Lana didn't stir, but her lips curled upward into a smile, dimples deepening on her cheeks. Mary Eunice almost didn't want to take her eyes off of Lana to continue reading. "So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory."

With her other hand, she traced the words. How could she don incorruption and immortality as long as she had the wounds on her soul? As long as that voice whispered to her in her nightmares? As long as she remembered some evil committed by her own two hands and wondered over the rest of the evil, acts so atrocious she could not recall them, how could she recover well enough to enter the kingdom of God, to have her death swallowed into victory? She curled her fingers into Lana's hair and toyed with one loose strand. As the cool, wet tress brushed her cheek, goosebumps appeared on her arm. Mary Eunice smiled fondly. "Sorry."

Lana's eyelashes fluttered when she removed her hand and returned to the text in front of her. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law." Her brow furled, unable to puzzle through the last bit; she underlined it with her pen. Perhaps she would mention it to Father Joseph the next time she met with him, or to the priest at the parish they attended after mass on Sunday. "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye
stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

Once she had finished the passage, she closed the Bible. The cover gave a muffled thump when it fell to the pages, and she placed it upon the nightstand where she liked to visit it. She flicked off the bedside lamp and cast the bedroom into darkness. Lana's voice startled her, a mild hum. "Sweet dreams."

As she sank into the covers, Lana shuffled upon the mattress, scooting to give Mary Eunice more space, and Mary Eunice resisted the urge to discourage her and share the neutral territory in the middle of the two pillows. "Lana, do you..." She drifted off, trying to think how to phrase the question with sensitivity. "Would you like to go to the cemetery? And add some autumn flowers, or something nice like that."

In the darkness, she could only make out the barest features of Lana's face, the outline, the shadows of her eyes, the movement of her lips. "I can't. I went with Barb and Lois—there were reporters everywhere. It was miserable." Mary Eunice wriggled underneath the cover, and Lana's hand brushed her shoulder as she plucked it up over her. "They were afraid they would lose their jobs if they were seen with me. It wasn't worth it."

"I'll go with you." Mary Eunice extended a hand in the muffled, dark warmth between them until she found Lana's in turn. "You deserve to get to see her."

Lana lifted their hands out into the cool air, fingers tightening together. "You don't want your face splattered in the newspaper. It's not a good feeling."

"I would do it for you. Mary Eunice didn't want to press the matter, but her teeth worried her lip. "I could wear my habit," she suggested instead. "Then, they might not say as many bad things."

"Reporters will say whatever people buy." Lana rubbed Mary Eunice's fingertips, squeezed the fingers out, warmed them in her palms. "It's important to you, isn't it?"

"It's important to me that you are able to see her and feel safe."

A soft sigh exhaled from Lana's lips, steamy where it crossed Mary Eunice's hand. She could hear the gears turning in Lana's head, considering all the options, and that triggered an alarm inside her; how often did Lana actually consider something before she acted? Mary Eunice seldom saw her debate with herself and weigh her choices. She wants it badly. The hollow of sorrow inside her grew. They won't even let her grieve. "We can go next week," Lana finally whispered, strained, like it pained her.

Mary Eunice released Lana's hand to touch her hair again, and with the combing of fingers against her scalp, she scooted nearer. Mary Eunice settled when she had an arm around Lana's waist and could taste the flush of every breath on her lips. "You deserve better. You deserve more."

Lana didn't answer; the silence tingled without her voice upon it. Her shoulders quaked. Mary Eunice smoothed them over with her hand, uncertain if the shudders came from cold or from tears. After Lana managed a soft, trembling breath, she whispered, "Goodnight."

"Goodnight." I love you. She didn't know why she stifled the words, but they felt misplaced with Lana so twisted by her grief. Instead, Mary Eunice held steady and awake until she knew for certain that Lana had drifted off to sleep, and then she allowed herself to relax into the embrace of unconsciousness.

...
The next Thursday, as Lana promised, she and Mary Eunice loaded into the car; Lana had a folder of her papers to deliver to the office for the column to run in Friday's paper. October allowed a strip of misty sunlight through the clouds, casting the day in gold, but a frigid breeze whipped the dry leaves over the pavement and grass in dry, crackling sounds. Mary Eunice had buried deep under her habit, now washed and free of dust. The morning sunlight reflected on the single lock of hair peeking from beneath her coif and set her face into a glow. Lana tried not to let it catch her eye, but like a bird attracted to a glittering piece of tin foil, she found herself drawn to the gleaming strands of gold.

This is all varieties of a bad idea. Lana knew the fact as she cranked the car and backed out of the driveway, turning to head to the office. Someone would see them. Someone would take their picture. They would find themselves printed in the newspaper. I just want to see Wendy. She wouldn't see Wendy. She would see a cement wall with a carved name, an epithet dubbing her as a beloved friend because Lana had no more claim to her. Wendy's family had not wanted her in her life, and Lana would not let them have her in death. She had so little left; she intended to keep it as hers, even if she guarded a pile of bones and ash.

"Can I read this?" Mary Eunice asked, timid, as she clutched the manila folder of papers in her lap so they wouldn't spill in the floor.

Lana puffed. "It's an opinion piece about the effects of professional sports on young people. But if you're interested, by all means." You used to care about your writing. You used to love it. The quiet voice in her mind echoed, similar to Wendy but gone too quickly, sand through her fingers, so she couldn't catch the tone and remember it. I still love to write. But dread filled her whenever she sat at the desk and typed more papers, each word both electrifying her and paralyzing her with images of Thredson's face. It riveted her and nauseated her like a roller coaster spinning faster and pinning her to the seat with its centripetal force.

"Never mind." At Mary Eunice's smile, words muffled by the hum of the motor, she ducked her head; Lana chuckled in spite of herself. "I'm sure it's wonderful."

She parked beside the office building. "Stay here. No, actually, come with me—no, actually, that's dumb. Stay here. I'll be gone for five minutes, tops. Leave the windows up and doors locked. Don't talk to anyone." She's not a child. Stop being so damn protective. She can take care of herself. Lana's tongue darted out across her lips to wet them, and she scanned Mary Eunice once. "I'm sorry, I'm being silly."

"I won't move," Mary Eunice promised. "You're not silly."

Lana strode up the steps into her office building, through the bullpen of men and women at typewriters with notebooks and soft chattering voices; as she passed, some of them quieted, and the gazes burned on her back. Her hand clenched on the strap of her purse. She wished she would have brought Mary Eunice inside with her. You don't need her. But the nun's solid presence grounded her when otherwise she might have floated away in her pain.

She knocked twice on the door to Walter's office. He called from inside, and she entered, dropping the papers onto his desk. "As requested. Column material. Is that all you need from me?" She pushed the clippedness out of her voice and curled her lips into a friendly smile.

A gray haze of smoke curled from the tip of his cigarette, clutched between his two fingers. He flipped the papers around and lifted the flap of the manila folder. "Sports influence on young people," he summed from the first sentence. He arched an eyebrow, hooded eyes gazing up at her. "This isn't your best, Lana. You've got a lot to say. A lot of good things to talk about. You and I both know you don't give a shit about sports."
Lana delivered, eyes narrowing, "I happen to care about baseball. I played through all of my school years." He pushed a lip out at her, doubtful. "Carl Yastrzemski is the Red Sox batter with the highest batting average today. Do you even know his name?"

The challenge fell from his face, conceding defeat—or deciding he didn't want to fight the battle with her. "You can do better, you know. You could give me something really great here. You have the power to start a social revolution. People are listening to you. You've got an open mic. You can tell them anything you want. Do you want to tell them about Carl Yemenski?"

Voice dropping into an icy tone, Lana held his gaze steady. "With all due respect, Walt, I don't want to start a social revolution. I am writing my book to tell my story, and people may take from it what they will. I want to get back to my life."

"Your life with your pet nun."

"She is my friend."

"Yet you brought her along and left her in the car, like a dog." Lana ground her jaw as Walter peered over his shoulder to gaze out the window, down at her car. The urge to quit shivered inside of her, to throw down her notebook and storm out, but she held fast to the reminder that she could not leave; without Wendy's income, she needed her job to survive. The meager amount the church gave her for Mary Eunice would buy their groceries, but it wouldn't keep their lights on or gas in their car. "I'm not judging you. It's not my business." Then why the hell do you keep making it your business? She flicked her tongue along the back of her front teeth. "But normal people don't move a nun in with them as a roommate."

Her arms crossed, hip cocking out. Her incision didn't burn any longer; the stitches had begun to dissolve, and her posture didn't relent, stiff spine refusing to show him any weakness. "I'm not normal people, if you haven't realized that yet," she grated. "You sound awfully judgmental, not to be judging me." A plea deepened upon his face. He's insincere. Behind his glasses, she saw Thredson's face arrange, losing the wrinkles, eyebrows thickening. "I'll see you next week, Walt."

"Leave the nun at home next week."

She ignored his words, too infuriated to attempt a polite response, but before she could make her way back to the front door and to her freedom, Wanda, one of the women at the typewriters, stood and announced, "Someone has to make a stand. We can't all be afraid of her."

"Of me? Lana's eyes rolled skyward to the ceiling tiles. She took a patient, measuring breath. "I don't want any trouble. I just want to go home." She knew she had avoided the office for a reason, but as the eyes of her colleagues criticized her body and face with mingled loathing and fear, the reason became apparent.

"My kids will not be going trick-or-treating at your house ever again!" the woman fumed in return, paying no heed to Lana's futile attempt to dodge around her. "I can't believe I ever let you give them candy! You probably infected them with your diseases! You might've given them to any of us!" The last statement elicited a few startled gasps from the group, all eyes riveted upon the spectacle. "Walt is disgusting, letting you come here at all. You're just a paycheck for him!" she spat; Lana took a step back to expand the space between them. "You should still be in that asylum—getting yourself fixed! People like you don't belong in the world!"

"I'm aware of what I am to Walt and what I am to the rest of you." Lana stared at Wanda's eyebrows, the illusion of meeting her eyes. "And if I infected any of you with the queer germ, I assure you, you would know." One of the young girls behind a desk tinted bright pink. "I don't think you have anything to worry about, though."
The front door of the building swung open at the same time Walt emerged from his office, and everyone turned to regard their boss as he strode out into the bullpen, ignoring the quiet closing of the other door behind them. "What is going on here?" He placed his hands on his waist and appraised them; the young employees skittered back to their positions, but Wanda and several other men waited for Walt to speak. "Hm?"

Drawing herself up to her full height, Wanda puffed out her chest. "You let this faggot come back in here with the rest of us!"

"Don't call her that!" And like an angel veiled in black, Mary Eunice swept through the small gathered crowd; the men stumbled back to make way, jaws dropping at the appearance of a fully-clad nun in the center of their workplace. She placed a hand on the inside of Lana's elbow, but her hot gaze did not yet appraise her friend, fixed upon Wanda with disapproval, fierce and foreign enough for the older woman to shrink. "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her."

Silence consumed the room. Faces appraised the nun, gazes dropping to the floor in shame or swinging back to Walter for some opinion. Mary Eunice held herself straight and tall. Her fingers didn't even quiver where they touched Lana's arm. With her head inclined, jaw set, she held his gaze, finding the authority figure and awaiting his verdict.

He appraised the two of them briefly before a smile creased his lips. "Well?" he questioned his employees, scanning them. "You heard the nun. We all sin. Get your asses back to work!" Several scurried immediately; Wanda lingered until he fixed her under his glare, and then she retreated to her desk, head down and cheeks burning. Walt's smile held steady, and he dipped his head to them. "Good day, ladies."

Lana whirled around; her instincts ordered her to flee, to whip out of there like a flag caught by the wind, but she managed to hold herself upright and walk in stride with Mary Eunice, who shriveled once they had left the spotlight. Down the steps, onto the sidewalk, into the car, neither of them spoke, until Lana sat behind the steering wheel. She faced Mary Eunice, but couldn't think of any words, lips parted in a flabbergasted O.

She plucked at her sleeves, a sheepish downward curve to her lips. "You were gone for more than five minutes. I got worried." Eyes downcast, she mumbled. "I didn't mean to shout at them. I didn't expect them to listen."

"I think almost anyone will listen to someone who barges into the newspaper office in the middle of the day decked out in a full habit quoting Bible verses." The line of Lana's lips broke out into a grin, and she shook her head, laughing in a relieved amazement. "My coworkers didn't realize it was 'Bring your nun to work' day."

Mary Eunice dissolved into an equally nervous set of giggles, hand covering her mouth to muffle them, but Lana quieted into deep thought. Why does she always come to save me? Mary Eunice had the spine of a mealworm, even when she was threatened, but when someone stood against Lana, she found new courage and fortitude, hidden in some secret well of her mind. "Why does that word bother you so much?" Blue eyes blinked to her in brief confusion until she elaborated, "Faggot," and Mary Eunice cringed like she heard fingernails rake across a chalkboard.

"I don't like it. It's not nice. It's a dirty word."

"I swear all the time. It doesn't seem to bother you."

"That's different." Mary Eunice had taken interest in her sleeve once again. "You don't hurt anyone when you say those words. Those people use that word to hurt you." Lana's smile
softened, broken, touched by the effort Mary Eunice exerted to protect her. *There isn't anything left inside me that can be hurt. He destroyed everything already. They can call me anything. It will feel the same.* "I like you the way you are. I wish everyone else could, too."

A muted snort passed through Lana's nose. "You're sweet." A pink tinge colored Mary Eunice's cheeks, and she hushed, gazing at her lap. *If she isn't the most beautiful thing left on this earth...* Even buried under the habit, the teasing strands of golden hair under her coif attracted Lana's attention, sent her fingers into tingling with the urge to sweep it back in her hand. The attraction burned her, forbidden and taboo in more ways than Lana could handle. *She would never trust you again if she knew.* Mary Eunice, for all of her affection, could never know how Lana felt, would never feel the same. But her presence soothed the wounds on Lana's soul so the weeping subdued into a peaceful hum, and she could sleep at night. She would ask for no more.

*It's time to go see Wendy.* With that final thought, she cranked the car and pulled onto the road, away from her greedy boss and judgmental colleagues, toward the tomb of her beloved with a new sort of beloved at her side.
The frigid breeze through the cemetery sent shivers up Mary Eunice's spine, sunlight and bright blue sky incongruous with the temperature; she flanked Lana, who wore a hat and dark sunglasses and glanced over her shoulder as they climbed the grassy hill to the mausoleum. Lana clutched a bouquet of pink carnations and white orchids. Her other hand wrapped around the strap of her purse with her knuckles whitening. *I wish I could see her eyes.* But Lana's face had become unreadable as she searched the deserted grounds for any sign of stalkers.

Leaves had accumulated in the open gray hallways of the mausoleum, but the walls shielded them from the wind, encroached upon them. *These walls are weeping with forgotten souls.* Many of the monuments did not have flowers or bore decayed stems with flaked petals on the cement floor. *What will become of me?* Would she, too, fit in a cheap box above ground with no one to mark her with flowers or remember her name? With no one to visit or mourn? The childish thought brought tears to her eyes. *It won't matter. You won't care. You'll be dead. And the fewer people you hurt, the better.*

The internal monologue quieted when Lana lifted her head and removed her sunglasses and hat, and Mary Eunice followed her gaze to the engraved name, *Wendy Elaine Peyser.* The wind outside echoed through the halls, straining the silence until Lana broke it. "Her real name was Winifred." She tucked the bouquet into the silver ring and crossed her arms tight; a shiver tossed her shoulders, but Mary Eunice held back, reluctant to intrude in Lana's personal space, her intimate moment with her lost lover. "She hated it so much. The day she turned eighteen, she told everyone—her family and her friends and her teachers—that if they called her Winifred, she would never speak to them again."

A smile quivered upon Lana's lips, wavering into a grimace and then back into the smile, fondness and grief mingled into such wretchedness that Mary Eunice tiptoed nearer. "I called her family the day I got home." The smile vanished, and her eyes closed against the pressure. "Her father answered the phone. I told him—" Her voice choked, but she hadn't begun to cry. *She's trying so hard to be strong.* Mary Eunice softened, tears upon her own cheeks. *You're already the strongest person I've ever known.* "I told him she was gone—she'd been murdered—" Lana shook her head. "He went all quiet. Just dead silent. And then he asked me if I was kidding, and I said, 'No, sir.' He didn't say anything else for awhile, and then he said, 'Okay,' and he hung up on me. Just like that. Just—okay."

Mary Eunice's tentative hand pressed to the small of Lana's back, fingers chilled and slow to bend; she could not feel Lana's body heat through her fleece jacket. "But if her mother knew it said Wendy, instead of Winifred—she would lose her mind. She would be furious." The red lower lip trembled. "She was always Wendy to me. I don't know how her family couldn't see her as that—as what she was—couldn't love her the way she came. She was never Winifred. I don't understand—as much as I loved her, as much as she was worth loving, why they couldn't see how amazing she was."

With the backs of her hands, Lana wiped her eyes, smearing the wet tears away from their corners.
across the bridge of her nose. "I don't understand family—how they love you so much one minute, and one thing changes, and suddenly they don't love you at all. You realize they never loved you. They loved the image they had created of you." She gulped and pinched the end of her nose. "They may have had you your whole life, but they don't know you. And their affection crumbles so easily."

A bitter curve sucked downward at Lana's lips. "The Peysers never loved Wendy. They loved Winifred. Winifred never existed. She was always my Wendy—my goddamned beautiful, perfect Wendy." A shudder wracked Lana's body, a suppressed sob, and she curled into the front of Mary Eunice's habit; Mary Eunice swept her into a hug and held her. "And I miss her—so much." Her choked voice coughed its last pathetic, weeping note as she brought the knuckles of her fist to her lips to stifle her cries.

No words came to Mary Eunice's lips; she held no comfort for Lana except the embrace of her own two arms and the unfathomable twisting guilt and grief and pity in her gut. She resented every word a priest had ever said against homosexuality, every curse treating it like a disease, its practitioners cast out of their families and communities like lepers.

"How can anyone see this and think their love was not real?" She gripped Lana all the tighter. "How can anyone see her and think she's anything less than perfect? Why can't they see her magic?"

Her tears fell into Lana's hair in clear dribbles. When Lana's sobs stopped wracking her body, she lingered in Mary Eunice's folded arms, eyes closed. Exhaustion pinched their corners. "I'm sorry," she mumbled in her thick voice, croaking around her tears; her cheeks reddened and warmed as she shook her head. "I got snot all over your habit."

A muted, sheepish giggle followed from Mary Eunice's lips. "That's why I'm here." She smoothed Lana's hair back out of her face so the strands wouldn't stick to her face. "I'm your glorified tissue box." Lana snorted, and a wry smile touched her lips; she reached into her purse and found a handkerchief, blowing her nose. "Are you okay?" Mary Eunice pressed the question in a delicate way, knowing the answer, knowing she could do nothing to fix it.

Her arm found its way around Lana's waist as Lana nodded, facing the stone wall once again. She pressed one palm to the cold marble face. "I can't feel her here. I don't feel close to her. I thought, maybe, I could feel her—presence, or something silly like that."

"It's not silly." Mary Eunice knew better than most the feeling of craving the caress of someone long gone; she had wept through too many long nights as a child, wishing her mother would hold her one more time. "I understand."

Lana's tongue darted across her lips as she retracted her hand, folded it into her crossed arms to regain the warmth it had lost. "Do you pray for her? For her soul?"

"Hers and yours, every day."

Lana smiled again, this time more genuine, wistful and rueful but still grateful. "Thank you. For coming with me." She placed her hand over Mary Eunice's and squeezed it. Their cold fingers exchanged and shared the little warmth of their palms. "I don't think I could have come without you." A shadow crossed Lana's face; at the sight of it, Mary Eunice's heartbeat quickened. Lana wore the remembering look, the dark mask she donned when a memory haunted her. We need to leave now.

Lana's mouth dried when her hand brushed the frigid marble. The frost clung to it like it had clung to Wendy's still, pale body, skin preserved in ice and salt. And when she retracted, the blue skin did not disappear. The horrified face remained fixed on her, eyes open and unmoving. Where the purple lips had parted, bloody gums flayed and flopped beneath. No matter how far she fled, the
purple lips and open eyes pursued her. "We're going to continue our therapy now, Lana. You can begin by kissing her cold lips."

The shuttering of a camera drove both standing women into a startled flinch. Mary Eunice's grip on Lana tightened as several men approached them, one with a camera around his neck. It flashed in their eyes. In the glare, his silhouette grew. Her breath hitched in her throat. Don't. Don't lose it here. But her tenuous grip on reality had already slipped. By the tips of her fingers, she clung to Mary Eunice, who looked back to her for guidance, shock and bewilderment blurring her blue eyes, and those blue eyes blurred into a frozen, toothless face—Lana gulped for fresh air. The cement walls tainted the flavor, made it dry and chalky.

"Miss Winters! Can you tell us about your friend? Are you a member of the Catholic church?"

This voice wormed its way through the others, mingling, as the crowd multiplied, first three men, then four and a woman, then six men and three women—Mary Eunice whispered, "Where did they all come from?" and Lana's bitter-laced voice spewed, "We're journalists—We teleport to the stories we want," in stifled fury, choking on bile in the back of her throat. Each flash became light reflected on horn-rimmed glasses. Each voice darkened and clipped like a snake striking, like a heartbroken psychopath of a cobra constricting around her ribcage—Stop it, stop it, stop thinking of him. You know where you are. You're with Mary Eunice. The corpse in her memory sprouted blonde hair, the snowy bits hardly a contrast from the golden hue; when she touched the shoulder, Mary Eunice didn't move.

The arm around her waist shifted to the small of her back, and a black curtain of fabric and flesh shrouded her from crowd of chattering voices. Her feet shuffled and staggered along with the ushered, bumping gait, occasionally interrupted by a low chime of, "Excuse us, please."

"Sister, can you tell us your name? Why are you with Lana Winters? Has she confessed?"

"Excuse us, please," she repeated, obstinate as she faced the man; Lana peered up through the sunglasses to the staring contest crackling between Mary Eunice and the reporter. He flashed a coy grin and took Lana's forearm. She jerked upright, tongue twisting to summon anything besides the scream threatening just inside her throat; Mary Eunice intervened, swatting his hand. "Don't touch her!" Her complacence vanished; the lamb of God dissolved into a lioness. The man withdrew like Mary Eunice had bitten him.

Another series of flashes blinded them. In the zapping of the bulbs, Lana saw the white of Wendy's teeth, pearly in a smile, dull in a mask of human flesh; her skin embraced Lana in the dark of their bedroom with the curtains drawn, but it tinged gray in the flourescent lights of Thredson's basement. Mary Eunice propelled her with more force and haste than before. Panic crinkled and reflected in her face. They spooked her. But Lana could not extend a comforting hand or word. She tucked back into her shell, lowering her head beneath the collar of her jacket.

They retreated across the grass graves, crunched through the dry leaves. Mary Eunice stumbled in a patch of overgrown wild onions, but Lana took her wrist and hauled her back to her feet. The flavor of nutmeg swelled on her tongue. "A perfect mommy snack," Thredson had said. She would never enjoy the taste of nutmeg again. Her purse slipped off of her shoulder, and she thrust it at Mary Eunice, not trusting her own shaking, sweating hands. "Keys are in—the front—"

The headlights became a vehicle in the highway, the asphalt scorching the soles of her feet. "Of course it's not your fault. Women are always the victims." The voice of the driver echoed there. "That's what you bitches do. You get out. You leave. You abandon ship at the smallest sign of a storm." His face evanesced in a crimson shower; the reflection of the Shachath in the mirror taunted her, reminded her she could still die, after all this—
Mary Eunice shivered above her, but her voice carried the echo of a memory. "Try not to move. You'll be in terrible pain." Her expression missed something, missed the tenderness Lana now recognized, but she hadn't known then—she expected anyone who had lived at Briarcliff for so long to look completely soulless, the way she felt. "You've had quite the adventure. The police said the car accident was horrific. I'm afraid it was fatal for the driver." Something sparked in her eyes, orange, inhuman; where Mary Eunice would have dissolved into tears at the horror, the demon celebrated. "But you're safe now. Back to Briarcliff, where you belong."

The motor cranked, and Mary Eunice reappeared in real time; Lana’s throat constricted at the sight of her in full garb. She flattened reflexively against the car door with a thin cry. A hand fluttered to her lips, like she could grab the sound and shovel it back into her mouth. Mary Eunice jerked to face her, eyes round as saucers, fresh tear tracks on her cheeks. She cries all the time. She cries when she feels anything. "Could you—please—take that off?"

In a smooth sweep of her hand, Mary Eunice removed her coif and veil, but her hands jittered when she started on the buttons, too cold to fix upon each plastic bud and guide it through the hole. Lana closed her eyes until she heard the whoosh of fabric fall onto the seat beside them. Underneath, Mary Eunice wore a long-sleeved deep green T-shirt and a skirt. With her hair tousled and long, she did not fit into the demonic shell, and Lana could meet her eyes, could slide nearer into the stream of air through the vents and the hum of the radio.

They exchanged a glance, words on both of their lips, but they peered out the back windshield first to the river of people emerging from the mausoleum, some of them pointing at the car like weather vanes guiding the direction of the wind, and Mary Eunice pulled out of the parking lot and onto the street before the hoard could catch up with them. Her hands shivered, eyes darting back to Lana, silent pressed lips asking the question her words did not dare construct.

Lana answered it, quiet, not trusting herself to hold steady. "I'm okay." She gulped the remnants of the thickness in her throat. "Thank you." She rested one hand on Mary Eunice's knee, and with the contact, Mary Eunice relaxed, muscles loosening under her touch; alongside her, Lana released a pent breath of relief. We escaped. They had escaped, had run so far—far away from Bloody Face, from specters with black figures and crimson eyes, from prisons cloaked in false benevolence, from priests with kind words and underlying intentions, from greedy bosses, from reporters seeking a story like junkies sought a fix, and still they fled with their backs to the wind. I don't think we'll ever stop running. But as long as they flew together, Lana was okay with that.

Mary Eunice stopped at a sign and waited for the other car to go. "I'm sorry," she said, then, her apology offered with closed eyes as she took a tempered breath to calm herself before driving onward. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't. It wasn't—It was—" Lana's tongue tangled when she sought the moment the first haze had crossed her, the answer to the memories screaming at her, the trauma's echos as vibrant as the original voice. "It wasn't you. I just remembered—something—unpleasant." Mary Eunice didn't ask, but the tormented self-hatred had crossed her face once again, the corners of her eyes and lips pinching like she tasted something bitter. I shouldn't have mentioned it. Lana's heartbeat skipped, but it had begun to slow, no longer panicked by all the prying eyes and flashing bulbs. "About the car accident, and afterward. Seeing you like that is—hard." It's like my darkness crawls out of my eyeballs and walks around beside me. But Mary Eunice was not her darkness. She was the only light Lana knew anymore.

A hesitant silence followed before Mary Eunice ventured, "You were in a car accident?"

Lana turned her gaze out the window, watching the familiar houses as they passed; her tongue darted across her dry lips, chapped by the wind on the cemetery, as she struggled to find a way to summarize the suicidal man she had joined in the cab of the car when she escaped Thredson,
when she thought she had found freedom at long last. *I have to tell her.* "When I got away from Thredson, I jumped in the first car I saw. The driver—he was out of his mind. Out of the fire and into the frying pan—going fifty miles an hour with a gun in his hand. He ate a bullet and let me kiss the trunk of a tree." With an acerbic snort, she curled her lip, muttering, "I'm a magnet for crazy people." She crossed her arms over her chest. At the next stop sign, a mother swung a young child on a tire swing in the front yard. "When I woke up, you were there. It wasn't *you*, but I didn't know that. You said I was back at Briarcliff. Where I belonged."

She glanced to Mary Eunice, mouth a thin line, and the car rolled onward, slow, blue eyes all around on the lookout for more children. "I'm sorry, Lana," she whispered. "I don't remember." A wrinkle appeared between her eyes. "I wish there were something I could—"

A black blur darted from across the street, and Lana shrieked, "Watch—" right as Mary Eunice slammed the brakes with so much force, she pitched forward and smacked her forehead on the steering wheel. Lana braced herself against the dash of the car. The long-legged form stopped in front of the car, cowering, and then it drew itself back up and dashed ahead, jowls hanging and tail tucked between its hind legs. "Is that a *dog?*" Lana peered past Mary Eunice, out the driver's window. "That's the biggest dog I've ever seen!"

Mary Eunice massaged the reddening place on her forehead, sprouting a welt between her fingers. "Did I hit it? Is it okay?" The large animal lingered in one of the other yards, smelling around, blocky face and round eyes peering around with pricked ears. "It doesn't look hurt—"

"The dog? Hell, it would've left a dent the size of Texas in my car!"

"I think we should make sure it's okay—"

As Mary Eunice reached to let herself out of the car, Lana dragged her back, arms coiling around her waist in a vice. "Fuck, no! That thing could tear out your throat or something! Leave it alone!"

"It looks lost. It's not drooling, it's not rabid. It's just scared."

Lana didn't relinquish her grip, but she swatted Mary Eunice's hand away from the door handle. "No. Let animal control do its job. If someone's missing it, they'll know exactly what to look for—giant, dangerous black dog." Another vehicle pulled up behind them and honked, and at the sudden blaring sound, the dog wheeled around, galloping off between houses. Mary Eunice took the clutch and drove onward. "Are you okay? That doesn't look good. It's swelling up."

"I just hope the dog's okay." At Mary Eunice's quiet words, Lana softened, gazing at the rising welt on her forehead. *She's more compassionate toward a dog than she is toward herself.* "Are you sure I didn't hit it?"

"Believe me, something that size, we would've felt it. It wasn't even limping when it ran off. That dog will go on to torment another neighborhood another day. It'll probably bite someone's child or something. Anything that size has got to be a menace." Lana frowned when Mary Eunice didn't relax, still glancing to the left as if seeking a black silhouette returning to haunt her. *Why does she care so much? Why is she so gentle? Why does she love so much?* The fond questions made her force her lips to curl into a reassuring smile. "It's fine. It's probably someone's hunting dog who ran off. They'll be looking for it now that the season is here. It'll find its home soon enough. You shouldn't worry about it." And with her reassurance, Mary Eunice brightened, eyes glowing as they darted to Lana; she nodded in agreement, consoled by the more plausible and positive arrangement of fictional events surrounding the dog.

Later in the evening, a record spun onward. Mary Eunice worked on a tuna casserole in the kitchen while Lana opened her column for next week's edition; she had sat with the intention of
opening the next chapter of her book, but after the morning's events, she dared not press her luck with her memories. Once she had a rough draft, she stood and stretched. "Sister? I'm going to put a load of clothes to wash."

"Okay. I've got about ten minutes left in here."

Lana gathered all of their laundry from the hamper and poured it into the washer. Among the garments were Mary Eunice's habit and coif. *Does this get dried?* She flipped the hood back and looked for the instructions on the tag. But the white sewn fabric attached to the habit had no instructions, only the handwritten name, "Sr. Jude Martin." Lana's eyebrows quirked. "Er—Sister?"

At her call, Mary Eunice appeared without question or complaint, wiping her hands off on a dish towel. White powder sprinkled under her fingernails. When she met Lana's eyes, she beamed with a full smile. *Christ almighty.* Lana's heart flopped, a beached fish seeking air, at the expression, complete with her scrooked eye teeth and perfect nude pink lips. Lana cleared her throat to ground herself. *She is so beautiful.* "Did you know…?" She held her thumb beneath the title scrawled on the tag.

She stepped nearer to read the cursive loops, and the comprehension crossed her face, smile falling and perplexed frown replacing it; she shook her head. "I—I hadn't paid any attention, until now," she admitted. Her eyebrows knitted together. "Why would the Monsignor give me Sister Jude's habit?"

"Maybe she donated it." Mary Eunice detected Lana's false optimism, eyes narrowing at her, and Lana cleared her throat, arching an eyebrow. "Right. I don't know. Could he have stolen it from her?"

"The Monsignor wouldn't steal from Sister Jude. They're the best of friends. They've been together since Sister Jude joined the church. They took on Briarcliff together. He wouldn't do that to her." Mary Eunice's lower lip pursed, but it hadn't begun to tremble; the thoughts in her head traveled through her eyes. Each twitch of her mouth and nose indicated some other whisper in her mind. *She is so expressive.* "Do—Do you think something bad happened to her?"

Lana snorted, shaking her head. "No. I think Jude might've happened to something bad, but not the other way around." At her words, Mary Eunice chuckled, gaze averting, but the concern didn't dissipate from her expression. "The Monsignor told me Sister Jude was returned to her position after you left. Is it possible she decided to leave?"

"Returned to her position?" Mary Eunice echoed, disbelieving. "What—What do you mean? What happened to her?"

Eyes widening, Lana's lips fluttered. *Oh, shit.* She had never told Mary Eunice about her brief rule over the asylum with an iron fist, Jude's removal from her position and placement in the madhouse alongside the other loonies, the electroshock treatment that had fuddled all of her memories and thoughts into jumbles, leaving her with brief spans of sanity and grasping at straws the remainder of the time. At her silence, Mary Eunice's dismayed voice pressed, "Lana!" with an agape mouth of distress.

Reaching, Lana took one of her hands and squeezed it, the dry powder smooth between them. "Jude was removed from her position and incarcerated after Leigh Emerson attacked her. She accused you and Dr. Arden of trapping her with him, but the Monsignor didn't believe her." Her face drained of all color as it crumpled, pinching closed, mouth wrinkling against the tears. "You were appointed head of the asylum in her stead, and she was treated as a patient."
Do I stop here? Lana hesitated, considering, as Mary Eunice's mouth quivered. No. She deserves to know. "When she was unruly, you and Dr. Arden gave her electroshock treatment." A muffled whimper came from Mary Eunice's mouth, and she brought a hand to her lips, covering them. Lana's belly twisted into knots. Oh, Mary Eunice, please don't cry. It hurts to see you cry. "When the Mother Superior visited, Jude made my case to have me freed. I didn't know what became of her—but when the Monsignor contacted me about taking you, he assured me she had been restored to her proper place as staff. I'm sure she's fine. She might have given you this as some way to make amends."

Sniffling silence followed. Mary Eunice dabbed her eyes and nose. Lana predicted the question before it came, but she waited for Mary Eunice to ask it. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I—I don't know. I didn't think about it." I didn't want to hurt you. The fearsome, sadistic creature who had run the asylum had disappeared from Mary Eunice's body, hopefully forever, and Lana resented having to consider them one and the same. Her meek, humble friend had never harmed anyone. You already carry so much on your conscience, so much you don't deserve, so much that isn't your fault. I couldn't add to that, not willingly.

Lana took the habit away from her and dropped it in the wash with the rest of the clothes, and she closed the lid, cranked the motor so it began to churn. Mary Eunice avoided eye contact, arms wrapping around her middle, shaking her head in disbelief. "If you're worried about her," Lana ventured, "you could always call and ask to speak with her."

"Do you think she wants anything to do with me now?"

No. The immediate answer died on her tongue. It didn't make any sense. "There's a reason you have her habit." Mary Eunice's teary eyes and streaked cheeks were not inspired by the single sentence, but Lana had a journalist's insatiable curiosity. "Then I'll call them. Okay?"

Mary Eunice bobbed her head in reply. Lana reached for a hug, but a buzzer split the air from the kitchen, and Mary Eunice raced off to save her casserole; the vacant space in her arms astonished Lana, the heaviness of the empty air. Pull yourself together. You've got to call Briarcliff. Her innards gnarled at the prospect of calling back to that awful place, of seeking out Sister Jude. She regretted having offered to do it for Mary Eunice, tip of her tongue tracing the tops of her teeth, their ridges and edges. She deserves it. She deserves to know what happened. You're already broken. Nothing can hurt you anymore. The cold reminder dropped into her belly and sank like a heavy stone to the floor of a pond; the sand rose off of the bottom and muddied the water of her conscience.

Mary Eunice set the table, cheeks pink, eyes bloodshot, and placed the casserole in the center; she had washed her hands, the white powder gone from her skin but not from her shirt. It's for her. She saved your life. You owe her a damn phone call. Her heartbeat quelled into a bundle of nerves, but Mary Eunice shadowed her into the office. The presence made her steel herself as she reached for the telephone and asked the operator, "Could you connect me to the Briarcliff sanitarium?"

The line rang several times before an unfamiliar woman's voice answered, "You've reached Briarcliff sanitarium, Sister Catherine speaking. How can I help you today?"

Sister Catherine? Lana glanced over her shoulder and mouthed the name to Mary Eunice, who frowned and shrugged, before she returned to the call. "Hello. Could I speak with Sister Jude?"

"Sister Jude? No such person works here."

Lana pursed her lips. "Are you sure? She was in charge just a few months ago." They've got a
new nun. The newcomer sent a shiver down Lana's spine. What had happened to Jude? Who had replaced her? Had they reassigned her? Or had she left the church entirely?

"Oh, her! Yeah, no, she doesn't work here anymore. We had a new head for awhile—Sister Margaret or something—" Mary, Lana corrected internally, but she bit her lip to keep from interrupting. "—but she was reassigned." No, she wasn't. Lana's brows quirked, and at her puzzled, concerned expression, Mary Eunice mirrored it, fear crossing her mouth in a twisted shadow. "A lot of nuns were reassigned, actually," mused Sister Catherine.

"Do you know where Jude is now?"

"No, really, I haven't a clue. I never met her. Now, the Mother Superior might have an idea, assuming she was reassigned. I'm sorry I can't help you, ma'am."

"Right. Thank you."

Lana dropped the phone back into the cradle and closed her eyes to consider the fragmented information the nun had given her. Many nuns reassigned, she hummed in her own head. But where is Jude? Would Jude have voluntarily given up her position, even if the Monsignor offered it to her? She didn't know Jude well enough to have a certainty in the answer. You have to talk to Mary Eunice. When she opened her eyes, she met Mary Eunice's gaze. "Is she dead?"

The dread dissipated for a moment into a dry chuckle, Lana's chest and shoulders shaking at the innocent, pessimistic question. "She's not dead." The Angel of Death took one look at that bitch and said, "Thanks, but no thanks." Lana restrained the sarcastic thought from emerging. Mary Eunice shrank in relief and did the Sign of the Cross; in her other hand, she clutched her rosary like a shield. "She doesn't work there anymore. The resident nuns were reassigned en masse and replaced. That one didn't even know who I was talking about. She probably got a different position." Mary Eunice's mouth still formed a straight line, and Lana, desperate to see her smile once again, soothed, "I'm sure she's fine. The habit was probably a leftover that someone found in the closet. She's off somewhere reading to children."

The line wavered. Please don't cry more. Lana braced herself, but the lips curled upward into a weak smile. "Those poor children." At the utterance, both of them dissolved into laughter, Mary Eunice giggling with nervous jitters; her hands quivered, and she avoided eye contact with Lana, sacred beads wrapped around her hand, clutched until her knuckles whitened.

Lana touched the back of her fist and unwove the rosary from around her fingers. She tucked it into Mary Eunice's front pocket, watched those fingers coil around empty air, seeking the comfort the item provided. Temptation rose in Lana's chest to replace the rosary with her own hand. She squelched it. You're rebounding. You don't love her. You're lonely. You miss Wendy. You don't know how to be alone. Mary Eunice is untouchable. "Let's eat dinner."

They ate at the table while the record spun onward, the harmonic voices of Simon and Garfunkel chiming about a miserable sparrow with no friends. Mary Eunice pushed her casserole around her plate with her fork. Whenever she took a bite out of it, her nose scrunched up, eyes crinkling at the corners, and she swallowed without chewing and gulped from her water glass.

"Why did you make tuna casserole if you don't like it?" She's made better meals, but it's not worth choking over. Lana had no intention of criticizing the food Mary Eunice prepared; she didn't ask her friend to cook every meal they consumed, and she was grateful she didn't have to take time out of her day to set fires in the kitchen.

Mary Eunice's lips squirmed while she sought an answer. "We had tuna and noodles. I forgot how gross it is, I guess." She shrugged as she chopped her slice into smaller bits, like cutting it up
would make it disappear from her plate. "What do you want tomorrow?"

"Er—" Lana frowned. "I'll eat anything. You know that."

"But tomorrow's your birthday. I should make something you like." Lana's lips parted, struggling to form the question, *How did you know?* but Mary Eunice nodded to the wall. "It's written on the calendar." The date had a glaring red circle around it, and read in Wendy's handwriting, *Lana's b-day.* Her cheeks warmed, chest flushed with embarrassment and affection for Wendy. "What kind of cake do you want?"

"You don't have to make me a cake. We had cake two weeks ago, with Barb and Lois. You don't even eat cake—I can't eat a whole cake by myself." Lana cleared the rest of her casserole from her plate and wiped her mouth with her napkin. She took a sip of her wine. "I'll order a pizza, and we can go to the drive-in."

Mary Eunice's eyes widened, her mouth forming a small, gaping O. "I've never been to the movies before," she mumbled. She glanced down at the plate of casserole, considering it, before she dropped her fork back into the plate. She had forfeited the match. The tuna casserole emerged victorious.

"Then you'll get to say you've been to the movies." Lana stood and took their plates, scraping off the remnants into the trash while Mary Eunice ran the hot water to wash the dishes. "I don't even know what's playing. I'll check the paper tomorrow when I read what they managed to make of our fiasco in the cemetery."

Sleeves rolled up to her elbows, Mary Eunice squeezed a gratuitous amount of soap onto the sponge and lathered up the pan in which she had baked the casserole. Her teeth worried her lower lip. On her exposed arm, Lana spied the ridged, scabbed dots where she had picked wounds into her flesh. "Couldn't you ask your boss not to run the article?"

Lana puffed a snort and took the pan when Mary Eunice deemed it clean enough, drying it with a clean dish towel. "Asking Walter Emmerman not to run an article is like asking a businessman to throw away a fifty dollar bill. He thinks with his wallet. People want to read about me, so he'll sell it to them."

"But—earlier, he defended you. Isn't he your friend?"

*No, he isn't. I don't have any normal friends. Ordinary people don't mix with our kind.* Lana fought those words; Mary Eunice wouldn't understand. She loved everyone. She knew no kind other than humankind. "He wants to keep me around so he can milk my story as long as possible. I'm the best thing that has ever happened to him." Lana's lip curled, and Mary Eunice paused her scrubbing to look back at her. Her bitterness crept through in spite of her best attempts to stifle it. "He doesn't support me more than any of the others. There are only two kinds of straight people—normal people." She dried another plate. "Some of them hate you to your face, and some of them hate you behind your back."

With a pursed lower lip, Mary Eunice tucked away the forks into the silverware drawer. "I don't hate you." Lana's heart sank when she reconsidered her own words, but her jaw set, reluctant to revoke the conviction. "I love you. I don't want anyone to ever treat you differently."

"You don't count. You're married to God." *Married to God isn't an exemption,* she reminded herself. *Those people married to God locked you up in that place.* The vows didn't make Mary Eunice different from the others, from the haters. But then what did? What made her so compassionate and loving and accepting where Lana had never found those things? What made her soft? "But—thank you. I appreciate it."
The wry puff that left Mary Eunice's nose startled Lana, sarcastic in its demeanor, and her eyes narrowed. *Goddamn, if she isn't acting like me.* "You shouldn't have to appreciate being treated like a human being." *I've created a cynical nun. How did I manage to do that?* But in spite of the dark thoughts coursing through her head, the mocking voices, she knew no amount of prodding commentary could ever alter Mary Eunice's golden heart, dipped in naivete and rolled in compassion like a chocolate covered cherry. "You didn't tell me what kind of cake you want."

"I told you, I don't want a cake." Lana mopped up the flour with a wet rag from the counter and wrung it out. "C'mon, there are *Bonanza* reruns playing tonight. I know you don't like horses, but maybe you'll catch on." Mary Eunice's hands worried in the air, seeking another duty, eyes scanning the counter for something she may have missed, some chore she hadn't performed. "Let's go."

The night passed in a soft silence for Lana, who awoke the next morning with pale sunlight streaming through the window. "Mm… What time is it?" The chilly air of the bedroom pressed upon her face, and she rolled over onto her side, one arm grappling for Mary Eunice. "It's cold." Her hand patted empty covers, sheets drawn back, and she peeked one eye open to find the other side of the bed vacant. "Sister?" The clock on the wall told her it was nearly nine—later than they liked to sleep, but no great leap from their typical rising between seven-thirty and eight.

Her heart fluttered into her throat as she crawled out of bed, bare toes touching the shag carpet, and she turned to the bathroom, but the door stood wide open, the light off. Lana tiptoed into it anyway; she flicked the switch and glanced around, peeked behind the shower curtain, to no avail. "Sister?" Her voice, intended to project into a call, shriveled into a whisper. *Don't be silly; she's got to be here. She wouldn't have just left without telling you.* Her skipping chest, however, refused to hear her reason. It insisted something had come in the night and swept Mary Eunice away in complete silence, abandoning Lana without even disturbing her sleep.

She fought her dark thoughts with a sword. The lump in her throat didn't dissipate, no matter how she gulped around it, and into the hallway, she proceeded; her hand hovered over the light switch while she considered if she should turn it on or leave it off. The living room, bathed in golden morning light, held the illusion of innocence. *What if someone murdered her?* Her lips trembled.

*Don't be ridiculous.* "Sis—" Her voice choked off at the sound of something clattering in the kitchen. *He's putting away the knives now. He's getting rid of the evidence. He killed her with her own knives.* On the balls of her feet, Lana prowled, cat-like and fearful as she rounded into the living room and toward the kitchen. A shadow cast out of the room, long upon the carpet, inhuman. It wielded something. The faucet cranked on with water pouring out of it, and Lana flinched at the sound of the spray.

Steeling herself, she stepped past the pictures on the walls, the ones of Wendy smiling at her. Somewhere inside of her, she reached for Wendy, for some guidance, for some strength. An uncomfortable warmth ground inside her. With it, her courage surged. "Sister?"

The shadow wriggled on the shag carpet, but Mary Eunice came around the corner, flour smattered across her face and hair and shoulders like some ghost drenched in white. "Er—good morning." Lana ogled at her, frozen somewhere between terror and humor and utter confusion. "Are you okay? Did you have a dream?"

Lana forced her tongue to loosen from the flat place in the bottom of her mouth, raked it across the rim of her upper teeth, not certain how to answer or what to ask. "I—No—I just, you were gone—why are you—what happened?"

"Oh, dear—it looks pretty bad, doesn't it?" Mary Eunice plucked at the front of her shirt. Flour
rose up in a fine cloud of dust before settling back into the fabric. She winced and lifted her eyes back to Lana with a sheepish smile, tucking her arms in.

Lana's uneven breath fought to measure her heart, still pounding in preparation to battle a nonexistent foe. In a breathless voice, she said, "You look like you showered in flour."

Mary Eunice ducked her head. "I—I didn't put it away right. It was propped against the cabinet door. When I opened it, it poured all over me." Lana's gnarled lips found the first hints of a smile and curled upward at the edges when she heard the nun's ashamed reflection. "But I got most of it cleaned up, I think, out of the floor and off the counter—and the pancakes are almost done—" Mary Eunice scrambled back to the frying pan and flipped a stack of golden brown pancakes onto a plate; in another pan, she had eggs sizzling, and in another, bacon. The timer on the oven ticked, twenty minutes left. Good god. "Happy birthday, Lana!" Mary Eunice chimed, like an afterthought, harried but bright with a grin.

Of course. She couldn't just accept no cake as an answer. She had to freak out. When isn't she freaking out? "I suppose you've given yourself this aneurysm for me, haven't you?" Under the haze of flour upon her face, Mary Eunice blushed, averting her eyes; her hands tittered in front of her, awaiting a rebuke. Her lips twisted downward at one corner with guilt, and Lana swore she could hear the chanting in Mary Eunice's mind, berating herself. Lana approached her with open arms. Mary Eunice shuffled into the embrace, and Lana pecked her upon the cheek with dry lips. "Thank you." Nestled so close, Mary Eunice's unique rainy smell mingled with the mask of flour, now clinging to Lana's clothes as well. "You didn't have to do this. I didn't expect anything." And it makes it harder to keep from loving you to death. Lana forced herself to separate first, to sever before her mind galloped with free images of the modest curves pressing against her.

"It's your birthday. It's supposed to be special." Mary Eunice flipped the bacon and scraped the eggs out of the frying pan. The pancakes had brown dots on their surfaces, a smattering of chocolate chips in each one, and beside the refrigerator, she had set out the can of whipped cream. She made a breakfast feast. "The chocolate cake recipe was circled in the cookbook, and there were some changes to it—I followed those—"

Lana wet one of the washcloths under a stream of water from the faucet and returned to Mary Eunice, catching her by the chin. "I didn't know you used the cookbook." She mopped the white powder off of her face and dusted it from her shirt.

"I—I don't, usually, but I didn't know how to make a cake." Mary Eunice scrunched up as Lana scrubbed her face and swiped the wet rag over her hair to loosen the powder from its snowy hold upon her golden locks. "It might be a little flat—I guess we'll just find out."

"I'm sure it will be fine," Lana soothed. "Put chocolate on anything, and I'll think it's the best thing since sliced bread." Her lips curled upward into a smile as her pulse quieted from the rapid firing squad style back down to the typical pace, skipping beside Mary Eunice, but steady all the same.

They ate at the table, Lana enjoying a glass of orange juice while she struggled through the decision-making processes—which food to eat first, how much whipped cream and syrup to drizzle on the pancakes, busting through the bacon and eggs. This is how you become fat in a single meal. It's like Thanksgiving, but breakfast. Oh god, I'm going to have Mary Eunice for Thanksgiving. That's going to be fun. She couldn't resist the grin tempting her lips at the prospect; in her mind, Mary Eunice scrambled over a turkey, mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, dressing, green beans, corn, brussels sprouts, cranberry sauce—more food than either of them could ever eat.

At the expression on her face, Mary Eunice perked up, and Lana cleared her throat; she had managed to muck her way through the eggs and bacon, but she still had a pancake left, oozing
chocolate and syrup and whipped cream. "I'm just thinking about Thanksgiving," she explained, "and you, overreacting at the prospect."

Mary Eunice masked her smile behind a glass of milk. She hadn't managed through as much of her plate as Lana; her pile of eggs hadn't dwindled, nor had her supply of bacon, and she sawed through the last bit of her pancakes. "Do you want to do something for Thanksgiving?"

Lana shook her head. "Lois and Barb go back to their families. I suppose I could talk to Earl, but he would inevitably have some teenager to drag around like a trophy prize. It would be all kinds of uncomfortable." Mary Eunice bobbed her head as she shoveled the eggs around upon her plate, like she expected them to vanish the more she moved them. After a few more scrapes, she took another fork full of food. Her eyes darted back up to Lana with a shy question, but she didn't press it, and Lana didn't ask. Once she had emptied her plate, she stood and washed it off.

"I'll get it—"

"I eat the food, I clean up the mess." Lana took the empty pans from the stove. "You can shower, if you want. You've got flour in places no person should have flour." Mary Eunice looked to her, uncertain, asking her intentions, and Lana returned the look with a smirk, eyes crinkling at the corners. "Go. I won't start a fire or break something." When Mary Eunice approached, her lips began to form a question, and Lana waved her off. "Yes, I'm sure."

A giggle burbled to Mary Eunice's mouth. "How do you always know what I'm thinking?" She had the soft glow on her face, the admiration which dawned over her expression whenever Lana made her feel validated.

"You wear it on your face." Lana took her plate and dropped it into the steaming dish water. But Mary Eunice's eyebrows quirked in confusion, pleading for a little more, a clearer clue, and Lana continued, "Reading people is in my job description. And you're very expressive. Even if you don't realize it." I can always see how much you care. Lana plucked her lower lip between her teeth to keep from speaking the last bit.

"Is—Is that a good thing?"

Lana chuckled at the uncertainty in Mary Eunice's voice. "Yes. It's a good thing. I like watching your face." The blush tinged upon her round cheeks, and Lana resisted the urge to peck her there once more, to watch her flush and fluster, all gossmacked and speechless and grateful, the way that never failed to warm the inside of Lana's belly. "Go on. I've got this."

Mary Eunice shuffled out of the kitchen, belly and chest equal parts full; she had filled the first with food, and the second never failed to swell in Lana's presence. You didn't get her anything. But Mary Eunice had no money, nor did she know how to make anything. So she cooked, sprinkling bits to make it special, questioning if she had done enough, as if anything could ever be enough to thank Lana for everything she had done. Mary Eunice had a friend for the first time in her life, and she couldn't give it back.

Once she had showered, deeming herself cleansed of all remnant flour, she donned a turtleneck and a long pair of pants, anticipating the chilly weather; she didn't want to shiver her way through a movie because she hadn't had the forethought to wear something appropriate. Combing through her hair, she let it lie flat and straight. She had wrung it out after the shower, but it retained water. She had grown accustomed to wearing wet hair at Briarcliff, stuffed beneath her coif like the rest of her body.

Hair rid of tangles and dressed in new, clean clothes, Mary Eunice emerged from the bathroom to find Lana, back to her, wearing nothing but her underwear. Her hand flew to her mouth to stifle...
her squeak of surprise, so in silence, she waited and watched. The twin swells of Lana's breasts expanded from her figure, the smooth skin exposed but nipples not visible. Her old panties had stretched into bagginess, but the curve of her thighs gave way to her masked buttocks. The plains of her back held a motley of scars. Her ribs and shoulder blades protruded where she hadn't yet regained the weight Briarcliff had stolen from her. *She's the most beautiful person I've ever seen before in my life.*

A dizziness flooded Mary Eunice; she feared she would faint on the spot at the sight of Lana. But then her lungs involuntarily gasped for air. She had forgotten to breathe with all the glory before her. For hours, she could have stared at that outline, imagined her fingers tracing the lines of bones and scars. Her fingertips yearned to kiss Lana's exposed skin. She wanted the story of every scar read aloud to her. She wanted to protect every inch of Lana's body from harm. *I am so blessed to have her as my friend. She is God's finest creation.*

Lana continued to dress, and when she turned to Mary Eunice, fully clothed, she flinched in surprise. "Oh! I didn't hear you come out." Under her gaze, shame inundated Mary Eunice's chest and her face; her hands wrung, searching for an explanation for her spying in silence.

"Stupid pervert. You're worse than Spivey." Lana's skin flushed as well when she noted the redness dawning over Mary Eunice. *You embarrassed Lana. Stupid stupid stupid.*

Having embarrassed Lana counted as a sin in itself, and the instinctive guilt burbled in her gut, telling her she had done something wrong, even if she did not recognize the commandment forbidding it. "I—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare." It was not envy, for she did not yearn to make Lana her own, nor did it feel lustful; she had no craving to perform any dark act on Lana's person. The emotions Lana created inside her, she had not felt before, but they did not taint her. They were the purest thing within her.

Lana wore a self-deprecating smirk, and in the blink of an eye, the embarrassment faded from her face, replaced by a certain ease with which she regarded Mary Eunice. "Some things are just too hideous to take your eyes off of," she teased.

Brow furrowing, Mary Eunice dug her toes into the shag carpet; they held the chipping layer of polish Lana had given them. "But—that's not it." She did not recognize Lana's quip as a joke and sought to rectify the words, to craft the proper words telling Lana what she thought. "I think you're beautiful." Her tongue darted across her lips, wondering how far to push, how much to reveal. "Probably the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

A weak snicker rose from Lana's mouth, but nervousness gave it a wheezy texture, and one hand fluttered to her collar bones as she approached Mary Eunice. "You must not have seen very many beautiful things, then." Her index finger stopped Mary Eunice's lips from conjuring another honest response. "I'm joking."

*Why am I so stupid? I'm an idiot. "But—thank you." Lana's brown eyes fluttered to her face and scoured it with the soft depths like hot chocolate. "That's very kind of you to say." I'm not flattering you. I mean it. Something else rested in Lana's face, somewhere in the crinkles of her eyes and lips, some emotion, but she did not speak upon it; Mary Eunice's heart, pounding along in her throat, refused to slow enough for her to question.*

When the coy smile returned to Lana's face, Mary Eunice anticipated the change in subject. "I got the cake out of the oven. It's cooling." She searched the room for the clock. "The newspaper should be here by now. Let's see what they had to say about us." Mary Eunice eased with the words, and she brightened, agreeing with a jerk of her head. In the blink of an eye, the sinful, shameful pangs faded, lost somewhere between the teeth of Lana's smile.
"At least you're not on the front page," Mary Eunice provided, weak and unable to offer comfort as she viewed the headline on the second page of the newspaper, which read, "Lana Winters Visits Grave of Murdered Ex-Lover," with a picture of their faces accompanying. The photograph flattered neither of them; the flash reflected on Lana's sunglasses, so her eyes looked like headlights, and Mary Eunice had a wide-eyed, panicked expression, lips drawn back over her teeth and squirming. "It could be worse, couldn't it?" You're not helping.

Brown eyes skimmed the article with haste, not lingering upon the words there, but her hands trembled with whitening knuckles where she clutched the paper. "Yeah. It could be worse." Her voice had a clipped tone, and Mary Eunice winced, averting her eyes. She's upset. Mary Eunice's tongue flicked to the roof of her mouth as she sought words. Don't. You'll just make it worse. Hand resting on her forearm, her fingernails dug into the skin there; she picked and loosened one of the scabs she had created with her anxious plucking. Lana, absorbed in the newspaper and the fury she had gathered against it, did not notice. "But it's still pretty damn infuriating." A scowl had etched upon her face, trenched there. "They didn't name you. You should be safe."

"From what?"

"Public scorn and scrutiny." Lana arched an eyebrow, lifting her gaze from the paper to Mary Eunice. "My fan club would get their panties in a knot, knowing I took you out of Briarcliff. They know what sort of place it is." Mary Eunice glanced down at her fingernails, the jagged ends she had tried to keep from biting. The urge to nibble on them jerked to life in her chest. You're awful. You make Lana's life awful. "People like that are more infuriating than the haters. They send so much damn mail—I would rather them leave me alone. Damn vultures. They're all damn vultures."

Should I say something? In the inflamed silence, Lana glaring down at the paper like she expected the words to change if she directed enough fury upon them. The dark voice surfaced in Mary Eunice's head once again, the one in Aunt Celest's tone. Of course you should, you moron. The Aunt Celest of her mind knew how to cut her down with a single curl of her tongue, just like Aunt Celest in her life. You're an idiot, Mary. You'll make a smart man a good, quiet wife one day. Her face screwed up to chase away the memory, and her tongue flapped to Lana, hoping to ground herself in reality if she participated in the conversation. "I'm sorry they're so awful to you." I'm sorry it's because of me. "What—What can I do?" The jagged edges of her fingernails pierced the skin of her forearm.

A heavy sigh fluttered from Lana's parted lips; she kicked up on the couch and flipped the paper closed, folded it in half, before she leaned against Mary Eunice's shoulder. The heat of her body sent a flush through Mary Eunice. Her heart skipped. I love it when you touch me. It makes me feel warm on the inside. What brand of friendship created the intimacy she felt for Lana, she wasn't certain, but she cherished it all the same.
A hand flicked against hers, wrapped around the softening heel of her hand and tugged it away from the open wounds she had created on her arm. "You don't do anything. You're here, where I need you." Lana smoothed the pad of one finger over Mary Eunice's bloodied fingertips; she turned her face away in embarrassment. That's a disgusting habit, she berated herself internally. "You pick when you're anxious. I don't want you to feel that way. What can I do?"

Lana's nose almost touched Mary Eunice's jaw bone. With their closeness, the abashed Mary Eunice fought a nervous trembling of her lips while seeking a response. "This makes it better." She managed it without stammering, much to her surprise, and she swallowed the collecting saliva in her mouth. "I like this."

A small, easy grin wormed its way upon Lana's lips. She lifted Mary Eunice's arm and slid underneath it, draping it over her shoulders. "I like this, too." Oh, goodness, I can smell her hair. The scent wafted up to her like fleshy, overripe strawberries. Mary Eunice could have burrowed herself into Lana's hair, could have lost herself there, could have gone into permanent hiding and never emerged. "What movie do you want to see tonight?"

"It's your birthday. You choose." The word movie sent a pang of panic through Mary Eunice, and she tightened her arm around Lana to banish the quell of nerves in her abdomen. She had no reason to fear doing something new as long as she had Lana by her side.

"You would make me choose anyway." The smile formed by Lana's lips and pearly teeth etched into Mary Eunice's memory, the reflection they cast, the nude hue where she sometimes wore lipstick. "We could see The Birds. It's a horror movie. Do you like those?"

Haven't we lived a horror movie? "I don't know. I've never seen one before. I think it would be fun." She smiled and curled her fingers in the empty air until Lana took them into a loose clutch. "A little bit like real life."

Lana laughed aloud, a wry, rueful thing, but still enough for Mary Eunice's smile to spread into a joyful grin. "Except when the scary is over, we get to drive away. We get to leave it behind." She traced the back of Mary Eunice's hand with her index finger. "In real life, it hitches a ride home and becomes a skeleton in your closet." The dark words didn't make her smile ebb, eyes returning to Mary Eunice's face. "Or it crawls into your bed and becomes your best friend."

Best friend. Mary Eunice beamed, unable to withstrain her joy even at Lana's mild, sarcastic quip. "To be fair—I was invited." You're an idiot. Of course you're friends. What else would you be? Enemies? The dark thoughts softened the temporary brightness from her eyes, but they could not banish all of the happiness curling in her tummy. Lana's touch evoked so much from inside her; even the blackest of her hateful inner voices could not measure against the love she felt for Lana.

Resting her head on Mary Eunice's shoulder, Lana's eyes drooped closed. "Does this bother you?"

"No." I love it. I want it to last forever.

"Good." A stifled yawn emerged from her parted lips, followed by a satisfied hum. In the silence, Mary Eunice watched as Lana's chest rose and fell; she didn't dare move, afraid of violating the reverie. Is she asleep? Mary Eunice tucked a lock of her chestnut hair behind her ear, and Lana didn't stir. She carried the uneven rhythm to her breathing. Yes.

Mary Eunice eased Lana's head into her lap and laid both hands upon her side. Exhaustion nibbled at her toes; she had risen so early to prepare everything for Lana's breakfast that it now caught up with her. But she's so worth it. One hand smoothed over Lana's hair. The image of Lana's nude silhouette remained implanted in her brain. Lana's worth wasn't the beauty exhaled from her body—it was in her friendship, her intrepidity, her loyalty, her courage, her love. Lana
was worth so much more than her body. *And all of her is beautiful.*

... 

A drawling snore awoke Lana, and she fluttered her eyelids. "Huh?" Dusk had consumed the living room, orange and shadows leaking through the windows. The light of the sunset reflected off of Mary Eunice's golden hair, giving it a strawberry hue. Her neck had wrenched backward. Parted lips uttered a snore and a wheeze. "You're going to break your neck like that." Lana lifted her head from the squish of Mary Eunice's thigh. *I didn't mean to fall asleep. What time is it?* Mary Eunice didn't stir. *She must be exhausted.*

The clock on the wall had a small hand closing in on the seven. *We're going to be late for the movie if we sit around much longer.* Her stomach growled. Lana rolled off of the couch, careful not to disturb Mary Eunice, and mopped a hand through her hair to straighten it out. Her clothes had wrinkled in her nap. Streaks and imprints of fabric lined her skin in pink flushes. With a sigh, she took one of the decorative couch pillows and lifted Mary Eunice's head from the back of the couch to tuck the feathered fluff under it. "Mm." Mary Eunice grunted, face shifting, but after a moment, she quieted again.

Lana went to the bathroom and straightened out her hair with the brush before she called to order the pizza. "Okay, I'll pick it up. Thanks." Behind her, in the living room, some quiet mumbles uttered from Mary Eunice, unintelligible. "Hey, sunshine. Time to wake up."

Another long snort drew forth, words forming with more clarity. "Gotta… feed the raspuhs." *What?* Lana pursed her lips. *What's she saying now?* "Mm—hope they're okay." *She's dreaming yet.* As Mary Eunice's head lolled back again, the pillow slipped from beneath it, and she banged her head on the wooden frame of the couch; a loud, hollow sound echoed, and Lana flinched. Mary Eunice scrambled upright. "Ow—my neck—" Both of her hands flew to the back of her head, one cradling the impact zone while the other rubbed the nape of her neck. "Lana?"

"I'm right here." Lana approached her. "Are you okay? I didn't want to wake you. You looked so peaceful." *Until you almost broke your skull.* She extended her arms when Mary Eunice staggered to her feet, swaying with dizziness. "Hey, take it easy. Did you have a bad dream?" She caught Mary Eunice's hands in hers.

"No—er—sort of—I guess—" Blue eyes fluttered wide and scanned the room, not lingering on Lana's face but searching beyond, the walls, the carpet. "I—I just wasn't sure where I was, for a little bit." Goosebumps erupted over the pale flesh of her exposed arms. "I thought you weren't here—for some dumb reason, I guess."

*It's not dumb.* Lana bit back the comforting words as she reflected on her experience of the morning, searching the home for Mary Eunice in an irrational panic that some man had come to kill them both. She did not intend to admit her fears and weaknesses to Mary Eunice. "Are you okay?" she repeated instead. One of her cold hands left Lana's to press against the back of her head. "Here, turn around. Let me see." She wheeled Mary Eunice around with gentle hands upon her shoulder and pushed her head forward, parting the thick golden hair to look underneath it; it had a silken texture, hearty but soft. Lana could have run her fingers through it for hours and savored its luster. "Where does it hurt?"

"It doesn't, it's fine." Mary Eunice's words came in a slurred mumble as she shuffled in embarrassment. She tried to twist back around, but Lana held steady. With gingerly fingers, she probed the back of Mary Eunice's head. The lump protruded. Mary Eunice cringed when Lana touched it. "It's fine," she repeated. "I'm fine." When she attempted to turn again, Lana released the soft hair from her grasp and allowed it to flow back to Mary Eunice's back. With downcast eyes, Mary Eunice's right hand plucked at the sleeve of her left arm, rolling it up.
Before she could break the skin with her fingernails, Lana stilled her hands. "Don't. Don't do that." She tugged the sleeve back down, leaving Mary Eunice to fidget. "Don't hurt yourself. What's wrong?"

Her lip plucked between her teeth; she didn't meet Lana's gaze in spite of Lana searching her for the eye contact. "I don't know. I don't remember." She squeezed Lana's hand, blue eyes on the places where their knuckles interlocked to form the mountainous range of fear seeking comfort, pain seeking reprieve, exhaustion seeking rest, all those things found in their combined grasp. "It doesn't hurt. It's sort of—I don't know." Her pearly teeth worrying her lip drew Lana's attention, the white on nude pink. "I don't mean it to hurt. It makes me feel better." It shouldn't make you feel better. "Most times, I don't realize I'm doing it."

Lana ran her thumb across the ridge of their hands, along the few veins and bones she could feel beneath the flesh without severing. She doesn't remember. But the dream had upset her. Like settling her foot on a sheet of ice and praying for it to hold steady, she asked, "Does the word 'rasper' mean anything to you?"

The bitter voice shushed when Mary Eunice stammered, "He—He sometimes took really ill or bad patients—the ones who were behavior problems for the sisters—and nobody saw them again. Except me." She gulped. The muscle of her tongue moved through the curve of her lips, raking across her teeth. "I—I fed them for him, outside, in the woods. He let me see what he did to them. They turned all blistered—they forgot who they were—they would eat any meat they came across."

Lana's belly flipped as she remembered the zombie-like figures she had encountered in the forest with Kit and Grace on the night they tried to escape, the way Kit had shrieked more like an eagle than a man when he pled for them to run away, run back to the asylum—for they found hell preferable to being devoured like Clara's broken body. Mary Eunice studied her face and entered a brief silence, uncomfortable, but when Lana didn't press, she continued, "Dr. Arden, he liked to make these—pets. Creatures."

"Make them?" Lana echoed. Her eyebrows quirked together, befuddled by the words, by the concept of creation. The tall, lean Dr. Arden sprouted into her mind with his black silhouette and shiny scalp. She had always found him odd and disconcerting, but she had never thought him dangerous. Clearly, you've absolutely no measure of who is dangerous and who isn't.

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Lana tugged her a little closer, congesting the space between them. "I know. I saw them. I had forgotten how afraid I was then. So much fear, different fear, other fear, and deep loss had plagued her; she had lost track of all the things she had experienced in Briarcliff, every abuse. The crackling of electricity in her brain muffled her memories, the good and the bad. She lost the shape of her cell in Briarcliff, the tone of Wendy's voice, the flavor of the semen Spivey flung at her, the fleshy flower between Wendy's legs and its savory scent.

"You did?" The disbelief hollowed Mary Eunice's expression; she became so empty when she lost faith and joy. She was fullest when she prayed. She is best when she is farthest away from you, Lana reminded herself. The measuring hint stung her innards. "When—Why? Did they hurt
A smile chased the soft snort Lana allowed to pass through her nose. The sense of urgency she might have once wielded against Dr. Arden and all the evil things at Briarcliff did not come to her, vanquished by the priority of comforting Mary Eunice. The evil at Briarcliff had gotten what it deserved, and the more she wrote, the faster she could reveal all of the perversions behind those walls. "No. I saw them when I tried to run away with Kit and Grace—when there was a storm. I don't know if you remember that at all." *I don't know if you remember what you did to Clara's body.* Lana had no intention of bringing that to light; if Mary Eunice didn't know, she could remember in due time with no aid from Lana.

"Yes, I…" Her brow fuddled with distress. "I remember." She retreated into herself, and Lana allowed her hands to slip away as she folded herself into a tight hug, afraid or unwilling to maintain their physical contact. A flush of pink tinged her cheeks. "That was when I—behaved untowardly—in front of Dr. Arden."

Lana chuckled, free, releasing it from her chest. "I would have loved to see the look on his face. Poor man probably thought he had entered another dimension." She said *poor man* but did not mean it; Dr. Arden deserved every shock and trip he encountered in his path of life. She hoped the demon inside of Mary Eunice had frightened him. The trance-like emptiness of Mary Eunice's expression did not fade as she clutched her own arms and gazed down at the shag carpet. "Are you okay?" Lana pressed, delicate, gentle.

Her eyelashes fluttered. *Have they always been so long?* "Of course. I'm with you." She used the words as an answer too often, but each time, Lana's heartbeat skipped into her throat, pulse flicking into her neck and tongue. *She places too much faith in you. You are not her God. You will make mistakes. They will destroy her.* "I always know I'm okay when I'm with you."

The derogatory thoughts reverberated in her mind, but she did not let them stifle her smile, her comforting words to Mary Eunice. "C'mon. We've got to pick up the pizza."

Dark gray clouds blurred the sunset when they parked in front of the tall white billboard; the movie hadn't begun yet. Mary Eunice waited in the car, face pressed almost to the window, straining to see Lana, who had slipped off to the restroom and concessions. In the pickup truck next to them, a young couple had already tangled themselves into passion, exchanging tongues like phone numbers. *Gross.* Mary Eunice shrank back. The scent of the pizza wafted up from under the seats where Lana had hidden it from the staff.

The sunset dimmed the field more until the blue-gray haze left only Lana's silhouette discernible when she reentered the vehicle. "They didn't have bottled water. I got you a 7 Up." She rolled the window down and picked up the speaker, spinning the button, but with nothing projecting, no sound came out. "Oh, great. We're next to the passion pit." Lana leered at the teenagers in the pickup truck, but neither of them noticed her.

"Oh—thanks." Mary Eunice opened the soda as Lana picked up the pizza and plucked it apart. "At least they'll be quiet, won't they?" A cool breeze rustled through the car, and she shivered, tugging at her sleeves to warm her hands. The projector whirred to life, and on the billboard, a young woman entered the scene with seagulls sailing behind her in a flurry.

"Ok—thanks." Mary Eunice opened the soda as Lana picked up the pizza and plucked it apart. "At least they'll be quiet, won't they?" A cool breeze rustled through the car, and she shivered, tugging at her sleeves to warm her hands. The projector whirred to life, and on the billboard, a woman entered the scene with seagulls sailing behind her in a flurry.

Lana turned the volume on the speaker all the way up and scooted closer to Mary Eunice so it wouldn't deafen her. "If they're not moaning and groaning the whole time." She dug into a piece of pizza with her teeth and grunted, gesturing for Mary Eunice to take a slice, which she did reluctantly. "The reviews on this were pretty good," she commented, both eyes trained on the big
The suspenseful sounds of chattering birds and soundtrack kept Mary Eunice's eyes down to the floorboards of the car, flinching at each sudden crash or crackle from the speaker. When things quieted, she peered up at Mitch and Melanie, wound into one another with exchanged kisses. *Has romance always been this dull?* Through the sleeve of her sweater, her hand picked at the scabs on her arm, absent and unconscious while she observed the man and woman, tangling tongues like the teenagers in the truck beside them. *They just met a few days ago. There's no reason for them to be so passionate. Besides, what about Annie? She's Melanie's friend. Melanie ought not go around like that.*

Once she realized she had begun to criticize the romantic entanglements of a couple fictional characters in a movie that had otherwise bored her, she shoved the running commentary out of her mind and rubbed her fingers off on the napkin in her lap. Thunder cracked through the sky; lightning blurred the picture in white for a moment. "Shit—it's gonna storm." Lana rolled up her window as much as she could so the cold breeze no longer rattled them.

On screen, Lydia crossed into her neighbor's house. Clutter littered the scene, and Mary Eunice tensed with the distant rumble of thunder in real time, muscles drawn taut with the combined imposed terror of the incoming weather and the camera sweeping over the corpse. The eyeless sockets stared at the audience; when Lydia's scream tossed through the soundtrack, Mary Eunice jumped out of her seat. Lightning burst through the black sky. A squeak shrilled from her chest. Her fingernails dug into her skin until the soft scabs broke once more.

Like a proprietary cat crawling into its owner's lap, Lana nestled beside her and took her hand. "It's a little chilly." Mary Eunice curled into the embrace. *But you're warm.* As the character fled back to her vehicle, away from the mangled corpse, Mary Eunice did not relax; she cast her eyes back down to the floor of the car so the film wouldn't startle her again. Lana massaged the roughened part of her hand. "I thought you said you were okay with a scary movie."

"I thought so. I was wrong." Lana laughed and leaned against her shoulder, the soft of her cheek resting there, her hair mingling with Mary Eunice's. In the darkness of the car, only the light of the projector and occasional lightning reflecting on Lana's face, the colors of their hair were indiscernible, equal hues of gray like in a black and white picture, so she could not tell which strands belonged to her and which belonged to Lana. *I like it most this way.* When her body became so close to Lana's, when she no longer knew which parts belonged to her, her love for Lana smothered the fear imposed by the storm.

As rain began to patter down on them, Lana flicked on the windshield wipers to keep the picture clear. Some of the other cars cranked and left the field while those who had rested in lawn chairs packed up into their vehicles. The cab light in the pickup truck next to them flicked on, attracting Mary Eunice's gaze; the girl's bare bosom flashed as she scrambled back into her brassiere. Tears ran down her pink face, all streaked and blotchy. "Shit," Lana murmured at the screen, having not seen the distressed teenager. "I think they're about to get eaten by birds."

Blood trickled out of the boy's nose when he sat up and took the wheel. The cab light flicked out. *She shouldn't feel like that. What did he do to her to make her cry like that?* Another rocking crash of thunder ripped her out of her reverie; she recoiled, and the pickup truck drove away, the silhouettes of the passengers drawn apart from one another. "Hey, it's okay. It's just a little weather." Lana folded both of her hands over Mary Eunice's. The right clutched hers in a grasp while the left traced the mountains and crevices they created, the knuckles and veins.

Her left hand curved to press to the tender veins inside of Mary Eunice's wrist, measuring her rapid pulse while Mary Eunice fought to keep from panting. "You've got a firing squad for a heart." The pads of her fingers rested there for a moment longer as Mary Eunice ducked her head,
ashamed at the fear provoked by the storm. "Do you want to go home?"

"No, I'm fine." Mary Eunice squeezed Lana's hand in a gentle flex, grounding herself. The rain showered upon them and muffled the audio from the film. "I want to see how the movie ends."

A dark chuckle rose from Lana's lips, and she nodded back to the screen. "Well, I can tell you that. Horror movies are always similar." Mesmerized, Mary Eunice watched the reflection of the light on Lana's face. "The blonde girl and the guy are going to end up together at the end—they're both safe. The girl will probably be injured so he can swoop in and save her, but she'll survive. The kid is safe, too. A director would never risk deterring an audience with a dead kid."

It also reflected on her teeth. Her breath brushed Mary Eunice's cheek. "The brunette is definitely going to die, probably in a horrible way, to remove romantic conflict for the man so he doesn't have to choose between her and the blonde. Given the context of this movie, I'll guess the birds will disembowel her."

Mary Eunice cringed at the prospect of having her innards torn from her body, and her right hand covered the squishy flesh of her belly beneath her sweater like a bird might shatter the windshield and pluck out her organs at any moment. "The only fate that's uncertain is the older woman. She may live or she may die. If she dies, she'll go out with a bang—sacrificing herself for one of her children and delivering some dramatic last line about seeing her husband again. If she lives, she will remain another woman reliant on the leading male character for survival. So now you know how it ends."

The thunder's arrival came in a rumble rather than a window-crushing crack, and Lana eased nearer, hands shaking the fear from Mary Eunice before it could claim her. Mary Eunice swallowed. "I don't want Annie to die. I like her."

Lana bumped her head against Mary Eunice's shoulder. Her face glowed. How does she remain so calm? How does this not bother her? With all she's seen—she finds humor in this. "You'll have to direct movies, then, if you want female characters who aren't the needy, dispensable shadows of men." The lightning gave her an ethereal beam. She's just like an angel. "Why do you like her? She's meant to come between the two main characters. You're not supposed to like her."

"She reminds me of you." You're prettier, and you wouldn't give up your whole life to chase a man, but of the available characters—The bright giggle worming from Lana's chest froze Mary Eunice's thoughts from a flowing stream into a glacial chunk. "Why do you think that's so funny? I think she's very nice."

"Oh, she's fine. Yes, she could be me if I were much more attractive and cared anything for men or for children." Thunder shook the earth and sky, Mary Eunice jerking in surprise. "It looks like everyone's leaving." The wind whisked through the field in a heavy gale. The car rocked on its tires. Lana struggled to remove her hand from Mary Eunice's tight, white-knuckled grasp. "We better go. I'm not dying in a tornado to see a bad horror movie. Hey—it's okay. It's just some weather. Let go." She tugged her fingers loose from the place where they had interlocked like rusted metal machinery that had gone ungreased for too long.

Mary Eunice hiccuped in surprise and snatched free. "I'm sorry—" She folded her arms into one another, each hand burying into the crook of the opposite elbow. "I don't like storms."

"I'm aware." Lightning ripped the sky like a sheer curtain beneath a cat's claws. The static flared in the air as it struck a light pole; their hair stood up. Mary Eunice coiled into a frightened ball and squashed her hands over her ears to muffle the explosion, vibrations rolling through the hollows of their chests and skulls. "Jesus fucking Christ!" With her knees tucked up to her chest and her face buried into them, she didn't dare move to look at Lana. Her throat swelled with the heart leaping
into it. But hands pawed around her body like a monkey grappling a branch. "Here, I'm right here. Shit, my ears are ringing."

Lana's voice carried a muffled echo, shouting from the opposite end of a long, winding tunnel. The car rocked when she cranked it and drove away from the blank billboard; the picture had vanished, projector either no longer operating or extinguished by the theater employees. She kept the flat of one hand resting on the middle of Mary Eunice's back, clutching her, rubbing in circles of attempted comfort. The patter of the rain became a sideways sheet, smashing against the windshield and reflecting the headlights no farther than a few feet in front of the vehicle.

The mingled mud and gravel flung up into pavement, quieting, so Lana's words were audible when she asked, "What's wrong?" No, I don't want to talk about it—I don't want to think about it. The memory bulged her dry tongue into a stagnant flab; she had not revisited it in years. Her lips made a watery line. "Sister?" Her stomach heaved with the title, and she gulped to keep from vomiting. I can't, Lana—don't make me. "Mary Eunice?"

The word, her own name, swallowed her into an underbelly of unvisited memories, blackness shrouding her tiny bedroom. Outside, the wind howled and battered against the window panes. The little girl through whose eyes she viewed the scene tucked the covers up tight to her chin, but when thunder shook the walls, she could not restrain the bleated plea. "Mama! Mama!"

A lantern cast a long shadow of the woman on the wall as she entered the room. Mama bent at the waist. A strange expression drawled across her face, absent, eyes not focused upon her. Her long hair hung haggard and tangled, gown rumpled and unwashed, but to Mary Eunice, she was the most beautiful woman alive. "Mary Eunice." Her tone held a hollow tone. A slur punctuated her string of words, almost unintelligible to the five-year-old mind. "We talked 'bout this. Sleep in your own bed." She would learn, many years later, that her mother had already taken the drugs which poisoned her mind and cast her into a sleep from which she would never awaken. "Remember what Father August says."

"Give your problems 'n fears to Jesus," Mary Eunice repeated like a mantra. But thunder pealed over the home once more, and she folded her knees up to her chest, hands fisted into the blankets. "Mama, please! I'm scared!"

"No. G'night." Mama began to close the door to the bedroom, face peering downward at the carpeted floor.

"Wait, Mama—Mama!" The door slammed closed with a clumsy stumble of the adult, leaving Mary Eunice on the other side. A broken sob wrenched from her, and she raced from the bed to slam against the wooden frame. "Mama, please!" she wailed. Her tiny fists pummeled the unforgiving wooden surface. "I love you! Mama, I'll be good, I promise!" Lightning lit the room and shrouded her into darkness again, so heavy she could not see the gleam of the doorknob to free herself from the prison, and she sank onto the floor, back propped up against the door.

The storm raged and her awareness hazed; when she snatched awake from the frigid grip of sleep, goosebumps ridged her arms and legs, and the tips of her toes stained a white-blue. The thunder had dulled from sharp cracks of a whip to steady, distant rumbles. The wind's shriek transformed into a frightening siren's song, a lullaby sung by a malevolent stranger seeking the hand of a child. Mary Eunice leapt to her feet and wrested the bedroom door open. She fled through the dark of the hall into the ajar door of her mother's bedroom; her parents had once shared it, but that was a long time ago. "Mama?" Mama lay with her back to Mary Eunice on top of the covers, dark hair streaming out behind her.

Mary Eunice fought to lift herself onto the bed. The first time, her weak arms gave out, and she fell onto her bum on the floor. Grunting, she used her foot on the edge of the bed frame to haul her
body onto the mattress. "Why aren't you under the blankets? It's so cold." The lower portion of Mama's arms had discolored, purple and blue, like bruises. Mary Eunice lifted one of them. The limb almost refused to bend, all stiff like a thick stick, and she wormed her way underneath it.

The coldness of her mother's body stung her. Her skin didn't feel like skin; it had no natural warmth to it. Mama's scent had dissipated, replaced by something bitter underlying. "Mama?" she whispered, doubting herself now. "Are you okay?" She touched the frigid, colorless cheek. "Mama, wake up." She's going to be mad if you wake her up. She's going to make you go back to bed. "Mama! Wake up! Mama!" But the stiff corpse did not move, could not move, permanently arrested by the kiss of death and the taste of two empty bottles of pills.

Give your problems and fears to Jesus. "Dear God, please wake up my mama so she can get under the blankets and get warm again." Big tears formed in her eyes. "Please make the thunder 'n lightning go away so it's not all dark and scary and cold. Please make Mama warm again. Please make her wake up! Please wake her up!" Each plea grew louder, less patient, more desperate, until the words lost all of their coherence. The wind faded, but her wails did not.

When the neighbors heard her screaming, they called the police. "Don't! I don't wanna! Don't take her away!" The officer shifted her onto his other shoulder so she couldn't see the bed anymore. "I just gotta wake her up! Jesus will make her better!" In the blur past his head, two more men spread a long white sheet over the body. She never saw Mama again.

The frigidness of the memory melted at the embrace sucking her, her face burrowed into a moving chest, a beating heart against her cheekbone; it throbbed too fast, the ribs expanding with a lost rhythm. A chin rested on top of her head, and thin arms wrapped around her. Like a child, the lap and arms enveloped her, but her legs spilled out, unable to fit into the awkward fold. A shudder chilled her to the depth of her bones. Rain poured and popped on the metal roof of the car, but the motor had died.

"Sister, you're scaring me." Lana. But Mary Eunice kept her eyes pinched closed. Heat smothered her face, all the streaky snot there from the sobs she had lost, fleeing from her chest after the crack of lightning cast her back into Annapolis, back into her mother's bedroom. She released no more of them now. Her throat burned like she had screamed. Maybe she had. "Are you okay?" I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. The mantra repeated like from a parrot's tongue; instead of an adjective berating herself, she formed the phrase and focused on it. She didn't know. Her psyche swam between the small child looped under a corpse's chilled arm and an adult nun burrowed in the embrace of a sinner, the only one who had ever cared enough to hug her. "Do you hear me?"

A jerky nod followed. Through Lana's chest where she pressed her ear, she heard the whoosh of air from lungs; the sigh tickled the hair atop her head. "You're here with me. You're safe." Safe. I'm with Lana. I'm always safe with Lana. In Lana, she had found a sanctuary, a loyal protector. Her breath quivered, but her tears did not continue to fall. She had exhausted all of them. "Did you remember something?"

Yes. Mary Eunice didn't trust her voice. Nothing about her deserved trust, not her voice, not her arms, not her legs, not her hands, not her faith; all of them would fail, had failed her before, had failed Mama and Aunt Celest and Molly and even God. You are a failure. She nodded with another jerk of her head.

Lana's hand lifted her chin up from the safe tuck against her chest and wiped the tears from her cheeks. The wet eyes dared to flicker open and land on Lana's face. She had shed her jacket; it rested in a snug drape over Mary Eunice's shoulders. "You're still shivering. Can you walk? We should go inside and warm you up."

She peered up at the house through the spray of heavy rain against the windshield. We made it
The trip had vanished before her eyes, consumed in the past. "I'm okay." The wind ate the bare whisper like a famished wolf leaping onto a defenseless animal, but Lana understood, read her lips. Neither of them surged into movement. Lana held her in that cradled position, arms coiled around her, and her eyelids closed. Behind them, a red-eyed demon had made its imprint, glaring at her. Jesus didn't save her. Jesus has never saved anyone. He won't save you. He won't save Lana.

The inhuman voice sparked her eyes wide into flight, and as she tensed, so did Lana, bracing herself for the next wave. Her lower lip rocked between her teeth and tasted of blood. A breath rattled in her throat, forming a series of broken grunts. Stop it. You can't even speak, you idiot. Lana smoothed a hand over her hair. "Let's go inside." Wind buffeted them all the way into the house, somehow at their fronts and their backs in the same gust. Lana held her upright through the shrieks of the wind, and they entered the living room. Lana stripped her of the sodden outer coat and smothered her in the throw off of the back of the couch. "Stay. I'll be right back."

True to her word, Lana returned in the blink of an eye with Tylenol and a glass of red wine. I can't. The objection died on Mary Eunice's tongue when Lana wrapped them both in a long comforter. "Drink it. It will calm your nerves." It must've been really bad. Lana had never offered her alcohol before, always respecting her faith and her objection to drunkenness. "Just relax. I'm right here. I've got you." The wine tasted like underripe grapes, sour toeing the line of bitterness. Her lip curled as she choked on it, forced it down into her stomach. "Good, good." Lana's hands roamed her, claiming her back and her shoulders and her waist and her hair, unable to linger on any place for too long. Mary Eunice closed her eyes. When those cruel red eyes gleamed back at her, she thought of Lana's face, the soft depth of her brown eyes.

"Good. You're okay." Lana took the glass from her once she had drained it. "For I know the plans I have for you,' says the Lord," she quoted. "'Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" Oh, Lana. A tender finger tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "I don't know many Bible verses. All the years in church didn't do as much as I had hoped." A weak smile touched Mary Eunice's face. One of Lana's thumbs smeared across her lips, curved into her dimple, mapping it. "There she is. There's that smile. Do you feel better now?"

"Mhm." Mary Eunice rested her head on the curve of Lana's collarbone, and Lana's arms held her in a fortress of strength and safety. Her eyelashes brushed the soft underside of Lana's jaw. "M sorry. I didn't mean to ruin your birthday."

The fingers combing against her scalp almost made her keen with delight. Must be the wine. Her inhibitions had shrunk down to miniscule pebbles lining the bottom of a calm pool of water. "You didn't ruin anything," Lana assured her. "You scared me half to death, but that's another matter." Don't be silly. You're not afraid of anything. "I thought you were having a seizure."

Shameful blush crawled over Mary Eunice's neck and cheeks. "I'm sorry." Not a seizure. Just a convulsion. Her stomach hiccuped with embarrassment, twisted with the influence of the alcoholic beverage, and she gulped to ensure she kept it down. Airy Mary can't hold her sherry. It's wine. Wine doesn't rhyme. "Are you okay?" You scared her. You're terrible. Stupid stupid stupid. The dark inner voice, the one she always carried with her to tear down her self-esteem and pride, distorted in pitch, first sinking low into the bass, then high in the treble. The shredded syllables shrunk the grip of her self-hatred.

Soft lips pressed into Mary Eunice's hair, and Lana inhaled, long and deep. "I'm fine." She uttered the words like a prayer against the helix of Mary Eunice's ear. "Remind me to have a mental breakdown on your birthday, and we'll be even-Steven." A giggle, girlish and nervous, fluttered from Mary Eunice's throat; whether induced by Lana's teasing words or the sensation of her moist breath against Mary Eunice's cold skin, she wasn't certain. "When is your birthday?"
"I dunno."

"You don't know?" Lana repeated. A quirk appeared between her eyebrows, furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

Mary Eunice shrugged, but trouble twirled upon her lips, a twist as she considered the events and the memory. "After Mama died, I went to an orphanage for awhile, and then Aunt Celest came and found me—but in all of that, they lost my birth certificate." Lana's hand had stilled on her shoulder, in her hair, and Mary Eunice took it to toy with it. "Aunt Celest thought I was born in March or April, so she decided we would celebrate it on Easter every year." A yawn built in the heavy hollow of her throat, but she resisted it, swallowed it. "It was easier that way. Fewer dates to remember for all of us."

She had not assuaged Lana's concerns; the frown upon her lips remained, a mingling of concern and pity. Mary Eunice gazed down at her hand to memorize the bending of knuckles and veins in its back. With her fingertips, she mapped those bumps and gaps in the bones. Lana's silence carried through and swelled in Mary Eunice's stomach, tossing into a quickening pulse. But when her voice came, it was shy, unusual for Lana's intrepid nature. "Can I give you a day?"

Taken aback, Mary Eunice blinked and searched Lana's eyes for reason. Nothing laid there but the warmth and affection with which Lana always regarded her. "Why?"

"Because you deserve a real birthday. I want to give you a real one."

"Mm… Okay." Mary Eunice could not think of a reasonable argument, and with Lana's smell and touch so close to her, cradling her broken spirit, she saw no reason to object to Lana's whim. "Whenever you want, then." You need to ice the cake. Her lower lip wormed between her teeth as she listened for the wind outside; it rattled the windows, but with the curtains drawn and the living room cast in darkness, she could forget the storm. The heat of Lana's body protected her from facing the weather alone. She would never clutch a cold, stiff corpse again.

Lana shifted to tuck her feet up beside her on the cushion of the couch. "Do you like April fourteenth? Is that okay?" Mary Eunice nodded, eyes half-closed. One of Lana's hands caught her cold cheek, supporting her head, meeting her eyes. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No. Mary Eunice had never learned the word. Lana wore an invitation under her nose, extended it like a hand to be clutched. And Mary Eunice did want to tell Lana. She had never told anyone. She didn't view the memory often enough, and it burned her like the touch of a demon pinning her wrists and ankles together. "It was a long time ago," she hedged. The urge to pick at her arm reared its head, so she tightened her hold upon Lana's hand to keep it stifled.

"It wasn't about Briarcliff?"

"No. It was my mother." Outside the home, thunder cracked again, and the lamp light flickered but did not die. The temporary darkness, or perhaps her words, sent Lana curling up against her, bodies curving into one another with the long blanket forming a cocoon around them. In the fort of shared body heat, the weather could not touch them. "It was storming when I found her—her body." Her eyelids fluttered downward. The lightbulbs clicked in unison, so when she opened them, she saw nothing. In spite of the sudden darkness, Lana didn't interrupt her. "I didn't understand why she wouldn't wake up, why she was so cold and stiff…" Each time Lana's chest rose against her body, it reminded her of Lana's vitality, of her soul, of her presence. She won't leave. I'm with her. I'm safe. "I prayed for her to come back, but she didn't. She didn't wake up at all."
The wine had numbed her, so she didn't cry; she had exhausted her tear ducts in the car. Lana pressed another tender kiss to the top of her head, into her hair, and she lingered there in their warm embrace. The rest of the house had begun to cool without electricity, but each of them served as the other's space heater. "I'm sorry." Lana murmured the words against Mary Eunice's skin, like she would absorb their emotion into her very flesh. "I can't believe you have seen so much and still are so soft." She toyed with Mary Eunice's hair between her fingertips. "The world has been so cold to you. You didn't deserve any of that."

"The Lord never gives us any more than we can carry." Mary Eunice closed her eyes and focused on the place where her skin touched Lana's, the heat pulsing between them, the tingling of her nerve endings triggered by Lana's nerve endings, every synapse firing to remind her Lana held her. "I need to ice your cake," she murmured. "It'll get stale."

"I put bread on top of it before we left. It'll be fine."

They rested in a lull, Mary Eunice listening to Lana's heartbeat and all of the things it meant. When the lights came back on, Lana stirred. She had dark, wrinkled circles beneath her eyes, punctuated areas where she needed sleep. "I'm going to take a shower." As Mary Eunice's eyes fluttered wide, lips puckered into a protest, Lana shushed her. "Five minutes, okay? I'll be right out. It'll be fine."

It's not safe. Mary Eunice's sleepy blinks and befuddled mind could not object, so as Lana stood, so did she, lumbering into the kitchen where she whipped up the icing as instructed in the recipe book with copious amounts of sugar, milk, butter, and a slip of vanilla extract. It came out smooth and creamy, and she slathered it onto the cake with a butter knife in a thick, white layer. I hope it tastes alright. It'll have to be good for Lana to eat all of it.

She clicked the lid onto the cake pan and started toward the couch to pick up the blanket; mid-step, the light died once again. In the sudden blackness, her heart leapt into her throat. The sound of the shower pulsing through the walls also vanished. The power went out. It's fine. It's nothing you haven't seen before. With the determination thrusting her further, heart swelling into terror, she seized the comforter and fumbled for its edges to fold it up. All of the things she could not see unnerved her fingers; invisible eyes fixed upon her, peering from the walls, the ceiling, the curtains. The hair on the back of her neck stood up. Don't be ridiculous. You're too old to be afraid of the dark. How many nights did you stay alone in the dark at Briarcliff?

She had clung to her book of matches too many nights, room illuminated by wax candles, broken window leaking frigid air into her chambers; too many nights, she had patrolled the hallways with an oil lantern, not because she was assigned duties, but because even the company of bedlamites was preferable to no company at all. Too many nights, Dr. Arden had welcomed her to his office and stayed with her in favor of returning to his own home; too many nights, Sister Jude allowed her into the kitchen to mix tomorrow's dough and watched her with sleepy eyes and tousled hair beneath her coif, her hard manner of love coming with long toiling hours and sharp quips. And on the worst of the nights, when she dared rouse no one else, she found Pepper, and they worked together in the library, sorting papers and magazines, Mary Eunice making one-sided conversation while Pepper occasionally grunted or hummed or provided an answer in her own language. I always found love—even broken love.

In spite of all those things, all those people building her, she thought she appreciated Lana most of all. Lana had no ulterior motive for looking after her, and Lana's love felt the most pure and unadulterated and soft. Nothing bound Lana to her, no church vows or unfulfilled libido. Lana acted of her own goodness, and Mary Eunice reciprocated all of those feelings. The sight of her face made her heart skip and her belly squeeze and filled her with such overwhelming affection, a cup which spilled over continuously. This love isn't broken. It's the best I've ever known. I am so
blessed, and I must give thanks always. The Lord has provided. Lana is the greatest gift I have ever received. With the folded comforter draped over one arm, she placed a hand over her chest where her heart quelled beneath the skin, throbbing, racing, flushing with the thought of her friend. She is so much more than a friend.

"Sister? Where are you?" Lana's feet made no sound on the carpet as she wandered with her arms extended in search of her. She found Mary Eunice's arm, the blanket folded over it. "Are you okay? The batteries in the flashlight are dead. I can't see anything."

"I'm fine," Mary Eunice reassured. Lana did not relinquish her but instead led her by the hand back to the bedroom, feet squishing into the shag carpet. "Will the things in the fridge be alright?"

"They should be. It doesn't usually stay off for very long." When they folded themselves beneath the covers of the bed, Lana's arms held fast to Mary Eunice, a child clinging to a teddy bear. "I've got you," she assured. She's protecting me, Mary Eunice realized. Lana had staked a claim and guarded it fiercely, wet hair sharing Mary Eunice's pillow. The notion spread a smile on Mary Eunice's face. "Sweet dreams," Lana wished her.

"G'night," Mary Eunice murmured. "I love you." Lana's nose pressed into her pulse point, closer than anyone had ever held her before—and how freely Lana did it, how effortlessly, like closing the spaces between their bodies was no trouble at all, like she preferred when they filled the empty air. Moist lips gave her a flush kiss upon the cheek, providing the only answer Mary Eunice could have hoped for. She touched Lana's hair, combing her hands through its brown shade; with its luster beneath her fingers, she eased into sleep.
Blue eyes opened beneath an expansive azure sky dotted by cottony clouds; verdant grass cradled Mary Eunice's nude, white body with a yellow sun beaming from above, rays shattering upon her golden hair. "Mm..." Stretched out in relaxation, one arm shielded her eyes from the bright light. She propped herself up on one elbow and scanned the field where she lay. A line of trees giving way to a forest stood a few yards beyond her. Lush trees and flowers rustled in the breeze, which tingled between her breasts like friendly fingers. Why am I naked? In spite of the intrusive thought, her nudity gave her no discomfort.

Branches bowed back as Lana emerged from the garden, equally naked; Mary Eunice drank in her golden-brown skin, her glowing eyes, nutty in the sunlight. A long scar traced her ribcage horizontally below her breasts. What happened to her? She grinned at Mary Eunice. "You're awake!" She extended her arms to take Mary Eunice's hands and tugged her to her feet. "Come on. The water is wonderful in paradise."

With her fingers wrapped around Mary Eunice's wrist, they wove through willowy and thick trees, young branches and old. The damp soil cushioned Mary Eunice's steps and silenced any sound of their passage. Paradise? Is this heaven? Did we die? She couldn't remember, but the questions didn't urge her mind or drive her anxiety; they dissolved as Lana's hand slid further up her arm. Her fingers followed the veins of her arm, traced the dimpled flesh, and goosebumps erupted in their wake.

The narrow, shaded trail through the garden opened to a glistening sea-green river on a pebble and boulder-laden bank. Lana broke away from her to race to the stone. She sprang off of it and landed into the clear water with an audible gasp. Her head vanished beneath the ripples. Oh no. Mary Eunice crept nearer. Is she alright? But Lana burst from below with her brunette locks sodden and plastered to her face. "Come on, Mary Eunice," she tempted, a smile curling upon her lips, luring the other; her tone sounded almost taunting with its flirtatiousness.

Mary Eunice tiptoed down the bank where the pebble-laden shore met the sandy bottom and crept into the flowing silver waters, first barely covering her feet, then reaching up to her ankles. By the time the chilly flow reached her knees, her pulse fluttered beneath her collarbones, heart landing somewhere in her throat. "I don't like to swim." Glittering minnows with flashing fins of blue and gray swam between her legs; she hadn't drawn in deep enough for the larger fish to intrude upon her.

Lana's feet stirred up the sand on the bottom, but the water carried the dark stream away from them. She retreated from the shoulder-deep water so the depth only covered her belly button. Her wet hair swayed and sprinkled loose droplets on top of the water. Brown nipples peeked upward at Mary Eunice, the flesh paler than her arms but still tanner than Mary Eunice's own. "Come here. I won't let you drown." She extended her arms, hands open, fingers beckoning. "Come here."

Each step brought Mary Eunice deeper into the water, the floor sloping underfoot. You're with
Each step brought Mary Eunice deeper into the water, the floor sloping underfoot. "You're with Lana. You're safe."

It constricted her chest when she reached out to take Lana's hands. Lana coaxed her into the deeper parts of the river with slow, small backward steps. "Do you feel safe?"

"I trust you." The water swept around them, undercurrent plucking at her legs and feet, sweeping them backward as she attempted to push through and follow Lana. "I'm always safe when I'm with you." She licked her lips. The cold water covered her breasts and drew her nipples into pebbled bumps. As the vines of panic tightened over her ribcage, her eyes closed; she narrowed her focus upon the embrace of Lana's hands in hers.

Lana began to tug their hands apart, and she hiccups, a squeak of fear. "It's okay." Lana placed her hands on Mary Eunice's waist and tugged her nearer; the space between them vanished. Their bare fronts brushed. Oh, goodness. Mary Eunice's breath hitched, not daring to open her eyes as her wet body flushed against Lana's. "Don't be afraid. You can touch me."

I am afraid, I am so afraid. Lana trailed a hand up the squish of her tummy, and in spite of herself, the ticklish skin made her muscles tighten, released a pent giggle from between her lips. "I—I—" Mary Eunice sucked in a deep breath to measure herself. Her anxiety swelled, filled her brain and her chest; as Lana pressed her palm above Mary Eunice's left breast, feeling the hammering heart beneath, her head spun, intoxicated by their naked proximity. "Are you sure?"

In an answer, soft lips grabbed Mary Eunice's, full and wet. The clean scent of the garden rose off of her, out of her mouth, between her lips. Her belly flipped in excitement. As Lana drew back, Mary Eunice attempted to follow her with her puckered lips, and a quiet, pleading mewl followed before she could stifle it.

Lana grinned. "Someone's a little needy." One hand rose out of the water to cradle the side of her face. Mary Eunice leaned into the touch; Lana traced her thumb over her lips. "Touch me," she encouraged again. "I don't bite." Her roaming hand cupped the flesh of Mary Eunice's left breast. "I can feel your heart." The palm kneaded into the small, tender globe, pressing there but not squeezing.

Shivering fingers smoothed up Lana's waist through the cool water, graceful and slow to embrace the submerged flesh; her hand streaked toward Lana's breast, but it fell short in her own hesitation as she instead found the horizontal scar beneath her breast on her ribcage and followed it with her index finger. Lana's lips parted into a gasp. At the hint of tongue peeking out, bravery possessed Mary Eunice, and she leaned forward in a wanton search for another kiss, which Lana granted. Teeth plucked at Mary Eunice's lower lip and dragged at it before she severed their kiss once more; Mary Eunice whined in protest, hand resting across the scar.

Lana placed a hand atop hers, shifted it upward to the swell of her breast. The nipple protruded into her palm. It's so soft. Something pealed inside of her, urging her to fondle Lana's bosom. Where did she get her scar? In a smooth whisper to Mary Eunice's ear, Lana uttered, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man." Lana's mouth then dove upon the section of neck beneath her earlobe and pressed a string of kisses beneath her jaw, across her fluttering pulse point.

Mind reeling, Mary Eunice fought to steady her breath and work through the words. She's Adam. I'm Eve. We're in Eden. "I—I—" Lana silenced her with another kiss, this one not as short as the previous ones, slower, softer. Lana's tongue slipped into her mouth, writhing and erotic as it met Mary Eunice's own. Hands combed into her long golden hair, darkened by the river water, and with the contact, a keening rose from Mary Eunice's throat. Oh, goodness, have mercy.

Her shaking hands, still not sure of themselves, roamed Lana's torso. The abdominal scar had vanished. She had no markings where Bloody Face had touched her, only the single sliced place where God had taken her rib and given it to Mary Eunice. We are the only ones. No one will
see. With those thoughts, she allowed her lips to slip from Lana's to her neck. The water lapped at her collarbones; beneath it, her hands flicked Lana's nipples. They tightened and hardened with her stimulation. Growing in her adventurousness, she bent her head and sucked at Lana's pulse point.

Lana gasped to her, breathy in its texture, and took her arm to drag her back to shore. Darkening red marks streaked her neck. Did I do that? Once their feet sank into the plush grass once more, Lana reached for her, drawing her closer with hands that brushed the droplets of water from her flesh. "Come here, my butterfly." A blush tinged Mary Eunice's cheeks as she dropped, obedient as a dog, beside Lana into the grass. "There's my darling." Her hand combed through Mary Eunice's hair, and Mary Eunice thrust forward, eager to kiss Lana again; in Lana's lips, she unlocked a chest of treasure within her own heart.

Lana caught her by the shoulder. "Wait a minute. Are you sure you want this?" Dark eyes scanned Mary Eunice's slender form, her lips pursed in anticipation, water dripping off of her in round, sparkling beads.

Yes! Mary Eunice's pulse made her tongue flap about inside her mouth. I don't want to stop. "God made me for you." Lana's fingernails scraped her scalp, teased her locks, and her eyes closed to revel in the embrace. "I am yours. Pleasing you is both my largest duty and greatest satisfaction." Her breath, her nose, eased against Mary Eunice's pulse point. You are so wonderful. I want to be yours. "Make me yours. I love you."

Lana pressed her lips to the center of Mary Eunice's forehead. "And I, you, my sweet." Mary Eunice opened her mouth to reply, but once again, Lana caught her off-guard and kissed her. Her heart flipped with the passion under Lana's tongue, the tip of it pushing those emotions into Mary Eunice's own mouth. On her neck, Lana sucked red circles in the shape of her lips, dragged her teeth across the skin just light enough for goosebumps to erupt across her limbs. With each mark she left on Mary Eunice's body, she pressed her claim into the flesh. "Mine," she murmured as she lifted her head from the protruding collarbones.

"Yours," Mary Eunice vowed, "always."

A hand pushed at her chest, guiding her backward. "Lie down." She reclined onto her elbows, hesitation shading her face. I don't want to take my eyes off of you. But as Lana's lips landed below her collarbones on the soft upward swell of her left breast, she collapsed, hair fanned out behind her in a halo. The exposure did not frighten her. "Good god, you're so beautiful." Lana uttered the breathed words into the crevice between her breasts, steamy breath warming her pale flesh. She kissed a line from one of them to the other, each time stopping at the bumps of her areola. "My sweet rose."

The tempting language, crafted by Lana's eloquence, brought a beaming smile to Mary Eunice's face alongside a warm, red blush. She wiggled her legs at a foreign warmth budding between them in her genitals. As they brushed Lana's own limbs, the brunette gave her a gentle, knowing look. "Patience, my pearl."

Each piece from Lana's mouth made Mary Eunice's pulse and breathing quicken, heart skipping. The hands grazing her sensitive, ticklish abdomen caused her muscles to tighten and loosen wherever Lana touched her; the reverent tips of her fingers trailed down her arms and followed the veins back up, reminding her at every contact point that Lana loved her. Her very touch worshipped Mary Eunice. "You are my most precious treasure..." Her tongue rounded her red mouth, wetting it. "Bejeweled in the best of ways."

Kiss me again, Mary Eunice wanted to plead, but before she could prop herself up and request it, Lana descended upon her breasts, tongue teasing the rosebud nipples. She gasped at the sensation,
the dewy muscle wrapping around one while her hand flicked the other. A throaty moan followed her gulped breath. "Lana," she mewled. Lana drew back to blow a cool stream of air across the slick skin. Her hands found Lana's hair and tangled in it. Don't pull, don't pull her hair— "Oh, Lana." The whimper emerged when Lana took her other breast between her lips, into her steaming mouth, teeth grazing but not biting, fingers teasing but not pinching. She caused Mary Eunice no pain, even as she left darkening red marks on her skin, hickeys sure to discolor in a few days' time.

Her chest heaved with the stress of it all, the overwhelming heat slickening between her legs, the untarnished love for Lana spilling out of her body, pouring out of her mouth in grunts and groans. "Catch your breath," Lana advised before she placed a tender kiss at the base of her ribs.

But Mary Eunice's breath refused to catch as another, invisible pair of hands seized her by the shoulders. "Huh? Ah—Ungh—" She wrenched away, rolled away from Lana. "Lana—help—" Something tore at her, wrapped around her ankles, but Lana vanished in a puff of dust. "No—Lana!" She choked her own saliva. "Lana!"

The foreign hands dragged her upward into wakefulness where she jerked, the covers tangled around her ankles. She screamed a ragged, pained sound. "Hey—it's okay—I'm right here—" A concerned wrinkle appeared between Lana's eyebrows, eyes dark with—concern. No arousal lay in those depths, and in a blink, the dream of Eden vanished, sending a shudder through Mary Eunice's body and a whimper from her throat. "You're here. You're safe." She thinks I had a nightmare. The truth rolled her tongue into a pathetic bundle. Oh, God, forgive me! Tears filled her eyes, and she covered her mouth with her hand. I'm so sorry, Lana. An unfamiliar, licentious heat still warmed her groin.

"Oh, don't cry. I'm right here." The rain poured over the roof like stones smashing on top of the house. Lana reached for her, embraced her, allowed her to shrink into a tiny bundle and hide her shame. She smoothed her hair out of her sticky face. "Can you tell me about it?" Mary Eunice shook her head, vehement in her refusal as she screwed up her expression against it. Don't think about it, you idiot, you pervert, you monster—you're disgusting—you're her friend! How dare you! You're sick! "Okay."

A thin gulp wrenched its way up from her chest. "I need to pray," she whispered, hands twisting in front of her in an interlocked bundle, fearing if she relinquished them, she would touch Lana—touch her and break her and violate her in all of the ways she had acted in her dream. "I—" She coughed around her words. "I'm sorry."

Lana tucked a strand behind her ear. "It's two-thirty in the morning. Don't you want to rest a little?" Mary Eunice shook her head, hair flipping around her eyes; she squeezed them tight and sucked a breath in through her nose to attempt to withstrain her tears. "Okay. I'll leave the light on. Let me know if you need something."

Mary Eunice knelt at the side of the bed and bowed her head with her rosary clasped between her fingers, wound so tightly between them that they began to turn purple at the tips and burned into the bone. The words of the rosary buffered from her moving lips while her thoughts collected and banished those images of Lana, nude and beautiful and seducing. You are deplorable. You lust. You envy. You claim what is not yours. You monster. She had betrayed Lana's trust, taken advantage of her, abused her friendship to build a dream of flesh-filled sins.

It wasn't a sin in the dream. Adam and Eve were not sinners—not until they ate the forbidden fruit, which she and Lana had not. They were married, bound by the rib they shared and the unique bond God forged between them. In the dream, she had given herself to Lana, her duty as a wife; that she enjoyed it so much was merely a matter of chance, coincidence. Stop rationalizing it. It was horrible. You cannot allow it to happen again. You took a vow of chastity.
She gulped the thickness gathered in the back of her throat. *Lana is the only friend I have. I love her more than life itself. The dream wasn't meant to happen.* "The Angel answers that she will conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit, and her Son will be called the Son of God," she murmured, hands twisting through the beads of the rosary. *It won't happen again.* "The Incarnation awaits Mary’s consent. Mary answers: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word.'" She lifted her eyes to the bed; Lana curled on her side, facing Mary Eunice, eyes closed but chest not yet steady in sleep. *She's waiting for me.* "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

A shriek of wind shook the house, and she unwrapped the rosary beads from her fingers to restore circulation. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name," she breathed, quicker now, urgency increasing with the sounds of the storm chilling her. But her heartbeat calmed from the panicked flutter into a steadier beat with Lana nearby and the intensity of the dream, the suddenness of wrenching out of it, dissipating from her mind. Her prayer passed from her lips, onward, as she abandoned the images of Lana in her dream. *She wasn't like real Lana, anyway.* Her misgivings quieted, even as the sinfulness of the dream burned her.

*Is it lust if it comes out of love?* Mary Eunice did not crave Lana's body; she gave little thought to Lana's physical form, except that she was beautiful. Her love for Lana stemmed from Lana's intellect, courage, and defensiveness, from the bond they had forged together. *You still shouldn't dream about her without any clothes on.* "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee..." *You could just talk to Lana about it.*

The prospect made her cheeks burn a fury. No, she could not do that. She could approach Lana with any problem, but this particular one remained between her and God. *I will not jeopardize our friendship over a stupid dream.* "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

Something scratched the window. Mary Eunice froze and turned her head to the glass. Lana sat up in the bed and scooted across it. But as the sound died, drowning out in the gales, she gazed out into the black of the stormy night. "Maybe it was just the wind." She settled her feet into the shag carpet and approached it, pressing one hand to it. Lightning lit the backdrop of the sky, and the lamplight flickered again. Though it did not die, she retreated from the window. "I'm going to find batteries for the flashlight before we're stranded in the dark." *Good, good, it was nothing, it was just the wind—where was I?* As if reading her befuddled expression, Lana inclined her eyebrows, reminding her, *"You were on the third Hail Mary."*

"Oh—okay, thank you.* You're a nun, and she counts your prayers better than you do.* Lana crept out of the room while Mary Eunice repeated her sacred lines. The scratching sound returned, not as loudly as before, and while her pulse strengthened, she rolled a bead between her fingers. *Just the wind.* "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen." She gulped. *"Hail Mary, full of grace—"

The lamplight died, and somewhere down the hall, Lana cursed, *"Son of a motherfucker!"*

*It's fine, it's fine, it's just the weather.* Mary Eunice persevered in her prayer, eyes closed tightly, hands clenched. *"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee—"* Something clattered against the window. She yelped and pounced to her feet. The rosary slipped out of her sweaty hand. With no light from the lamp, the flashes of lightning intermittently brightened the room; the blackness became more consuming. *"Lana!"* Terror shook her voice. Her arms coiled around her middle in an attempt to hug herself and stifle the fear swelling in her chest.

"Sister? Are you okay?"
"There's something outside!"

A bright beam of light shined in her face, and she threw her hands over her eyes. "Sorry." The fingernails of Mary Eunice's right hand dug into her left arm, picking at the scabs with a vengeance. "You heard it again?" As Lana passed, she took Mary Eunice's hand and clutched it, replacing the rosary in her grip.

Whether Lana grabbed her knowingly or not, Mary Eunice wasn't certain, but she held onto Lana like a life raft in a frigid, deep ocean. "Yes—it's at the window—it's scratching—"

On command, the raking sound crashed outside, causing both women to recoil. Mary Eunice grabbed onto Lana like a terrified child clutching a teddy bear, both arms winding around her middle and squeezing; Lana dropped the flashlight, and it rolled under the bed. "What is that?" she whimpered to Lana's ear, arms so tight around Lana's chest that she couldn't budge from facing the window. Lightning flashed. "Do you see anything?"

"N-No." Lana rested a hand on top of Mary Eunice's where they had interlocked, clinging to her in panicked desperation. Don't freak out, Lana berated herself. She's already scared. You can't scare her more. But with wide eyes and lungs refusing to slow rapid breaths, her pulse thrashed, she battled dark visions from the corners of her eyes. Thredson's face peered back at them through the blackened window, complete with his horn-rimmed glasses.

The raking noise rattled against the wall, punctuated by thunder following. Lana staggered backward, and she pried Mary Eunice's hands off of her clothing. "Let go—Let go. It's okay. Don't—freak out." Easier said than done, she cursed internally; her tongue refused to hold steady, chin quivering with the taste of blood heating her mouth. Mary Eunice's breath steamed across the back of her neck; her hands left Lana's body, and Lana dropped to the floor. She fumbled around for the flashlight and found the rosary first, shiny beads glimmering. "Here. Pray. We need it."

Mary Eunice cupped the sacred string of beads in her hands like a wounded bird. The bright beam of the flashlight reflected on the streaks of tears upon her cheeks. We can't win. Lana's pulse fluttered in the underside of her tongue; her stomach flipped so many times, she feared she would vomit before she steadied herself. As the noise scraped against the side of the house like fingernails raking across a chalkboard, Mary Eunice's complexion bleached white, lips turning over and buffering into an unintelligible prayer.

Guiding the light, Lana opened the drawer of her nightstand. Beneath several notebooks and journals, the cold steel of her pistol flickered, a dull luster. She had not touched it since she killed Thredson but preferred to keep it at her side while she slept. The lack of heat when it touched her palm cut through into her bloodstream, bracing her to face whatever threatened their home. But at the shape of the weapon in her hand, Mary Eunice recoiled. "Is that a gun?" she shrielled; her voice might have formed a shriek if she had had more vocal cords at her disposal, but the terror had stolen most of them. "Why do you have a gun?"

"So if someone decides they want to kill me, I can kill them first." With more confidence than her panicked heart intended, she strode out of the bedroom up the hall, and Mary Eunice scampered after her, whimpering and sniffling, her rosary tying her hands together. Thunder clapped above the house. In the living room, they could not hear the sound any longer. Lana did not calm in the silence. Face solemn and straightforward, she unlocked the front door. "Lock the door after me. If I'm not back in five minutes, call the police. Don't come looking for me."

Mary Eunice lunged at her and latched onto her arm, unshakeable. "No!" As Lana pushed at the screen door, struggling to wrench herself away from Mary Eunice, the inconsolable blonde dug in her heels. Shit, she's strong. "You can't! Please, don't—please—" Her crumpled, pink face
burrowed into the crook of Lana's shoulder. "I won't let you." She didn't relent even as Lana fought through the door frame, the screen slamming after them. Her chest heaved in ragged pants, voice and breath lost to the howling wind. The rain, pouring in sideways sheets, assailed them, stinging their eyes. "Don't go!" Mary Eunice begged.

"Will you—let go?" Lana wrestled against her. She's terrified. You're scaring her. You have to calm her down. Her own heart refused to cease the thundering in her ears. Lightning blinded them, cast their shadows down the porch. Hold still. Calm. Don't fight her. While the temptation rose in her to knock Mary Eunice over the head and toss her back into the house, she stilled in the nun's grasp, allowing herself to be gathered and dragged into a tight embrace.

"No!" Once Lana ceased her wriggling, Mary Eunice also stilled, arms wrapped around Lana like a sloth around a tree trunk. Her words continued in a murmured, free-flowing stream. "...never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy intercession, was left unaided..." What the hell? "...we fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins my Mother; to thee do we come, before thee we stand, sinful and sorrowful..." She's praying.

At the sharp, brassy roll of thunder overhead, Mary Eunice gripped her tighter. Her dark whispered words remained a panicked, urgent rasp. "Saint Michael, the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil..." She dragged onward, the words slurring together in places where Lana did not recognize the Catholic prayers, their sacred words and blessings.

Each gust of cold air chilled them where their thin pajamas had drenched to the skin. "Sister," Lana addressed, squeezing the handle of the gun until her knuckles whitened, fingers aching at the frigid temperatures. Mary Eunice's voice lost its words, forming another terrified, bleating mewl like the ones that had woken Lana not an hour before. "Hey—listen to me. Listen." The whimper died in her throat. "It's going to be okay." She forced the stammer, her own fear, out of her voice. "I'm going to walk around the house to see what's back there."

Mary Eunice's head began to shake, a vehement refusal; when lightning split the sky above them, she flinched and clung her fists to Lana's clothing. On her face, Lana could not differentiate between the tears and the raindrops. Lana nudged her backward. "Stay here. I'll be right back. Let go of me—" Her balled hands reluctantly loosened as her resolve wavered; mingled betrayal and despair laced her expression. This is killing her. It's eating her from the inside. "You trust me, don't you?" The shards of glass, which once formed Lana's heart, stabbed at the walls of her chest at the sight of Mary Eunice's broken look.

"Always," she whispered, tongue and lips quivering with such force that the word was mangled. Her shaking hands extended with the rosary stretched between them, and she dropped it over Lana's head, a blessing she could not form with her words as the sacred beads adorned Lana's neck. "I love you."

A warmth wreathed around her, not physical but spiritual, guarded by the protection Mary Eunice offered. It breathed into her, and she leaned forward, bouncing onto her tiptoes to kiss Mary Eunice on the forehead. I know. I feel it. You do all things with love. "Keep your eyes open," she advised instead, "and if you see anything, scream like you want the people on the next block to hear it." Mary Eunice's agreement followed in a slow, hesitant inclination of her head. "I'll be right back."

Mary Eunice stumbled back, thumping against the side of the house as Lana leapt off of the porch and vanished around the corner. Protect her, protect her, please, she begged, both hands covering her mouth and nose. Her eyes stung, viciously burning, raindrops mingling with tears; the wind stole her weak whimper. I can't do this without her. Thunder rattled the earth, and each sheet of rain upon her quivering person sent flashed images to the front of her mind—a cold, stiff corpse
curled around her—Clara's mangled body in the clearing where the raspers gathered, waiting for
her to leave so they could devour the evidence of her crime—Dr. Arden's lip curled in disgust, the
smart of his backhand across her face and the flavor of her own blood leaking from her lip—her
mother, eyes closed, face relaxed in a rare peace.

_I know this is Your wrath. I know of Your power. Please, guard Lana._ The bushes rattled beside
the porch, and Mary Eunice straightened, eyes flying wide. "Lana?" she squeaked. Her hands
wrapped in themselves over her chest, empty and helpless without her rosary. The scraping sound
raked along the side of the house. Dread, frigid and viscous, dripped from her throat into her belly
and filled it, sickened it. _It's coming to get me._

The notion of fleeing struck her; she considered it with detached, logical processing. _I should
run._ But her legs refused to shift, to reenter the home or to pursue Lana; instead, morbid craving
reared its head within her and drove her forward, down the steps, to the right. Eyes locked upon
the shrubbery, she proceeded toward the rattling undergrowth. "H-Hello?"

The slashing noise answered her, fingernails grazing a chalkboard. "Hello?" she repeated, less
confident as the dead bush jarred again, this time with more fury; but no matter how she willed
herself to turn the other way, something else compelled her to remain, fixed her soles to the muddy
earth seeping between her toes. Then, as the wind quieted for a bare moment, a long whine rolled
up from the decorative bushes.

_It's an animal!_ Mary Eunice realized, and she dropped into a squat to peer into the bushes.
Another soft cry wailed up to her. The thorny branches of the dead roses gave way to a blocky,
large black head. Floppy ears tangled in the plant, legs splayed in the hole the dog had attempted
to dig under the porch and protect itself from the miserable weather. A thick layer of mud covered
its face and paws. "Puppy," she greeted, hesitant, and extended one hand, its back proffered so the
dog could sniff. The black nose twitched before the dog settled its head back into the muck. "Are
you stuck?"

A thin sigh quivered from the dog's lungs. "Come here," she encouraged. "Don't lie there in the
mud. Come here. I won't hurt you." Falling to her knees, she patted her lap, and the dog lifted its
head. Miserable chocolate eyes followed her movement, intrigued but distrusting. _It has eyes just
like Lana._ "Come on, puppy."

Lumbering to its paws, the dog's skinny limbs trembled as it dragged itself to her. "Oh, you poor
thing." It didn't place its right front paw on the ground, holding it up and limping on three legs
toward her. Thorns and burrs clung to its short fur and pierced its ears. Every bone was visible
through the skin. "Poor baby—oh—oh, dear—" A fat, pink tongue lolled out of the dog's mouth
and caressed her face. The rain washed away the sticky saliva before it could disgust her.

He butted his head against her chest hard enough to knock her onto her rump, and then, satisfied
with his work, he crawled into her lap, resting his head against her soft stomach. He gazed up at
her with pure adoration. Mary Eunice bowed her head to look at him, thumbing his loose cheeks
in an effort to remove the slime; underneath, gray hairs covered his muzzle. "I've seen you before,
haven't I?" His eyes flicked and lolled, not considering her words, but Mary Eunice remembered
the large dog she had nearly hit on the way home from the cemetery. "How long have you been
on your own?" She smoothed her hand over the flat top of his blocky head. "What brought you
here?"

At the next clap of thunder, the dog cried out as if in pain, and he rocked back to his paws. His
balance faltered; he flopped onto his flank and flailed in a puddle of sludge. "No, no, it's okay!"
Mary Eunice pursued him with outstretched arms. "It's okay," she soothed as she sprawled out,
lying down on the ground beside him, face to face. "I don't like storms, either." Her hair dragged
through the dirty water. Her whole body shivered. The dog extended his good leg and pawed at
her. The claws curled under, having gone uncut for so long. "I know what it's like to be alone, too." The fat, pink tongue embraced her face when she drew near enough, and in spite of the misery of it all, the downpour and the howling wind and the roaring thunder and the white lightning illuminating the sky in bold flashes.

"It's scary, isn't it? Being by yourself." She drew her thumb over a thorn dangling from the dog's lip and slipped it out of his skin. He didn't flinch, gazing back at her. "Not having anybody to love you, or take care of you, or hug you when it storms." She closed her eyes when the cold, leathery nose pressed against her cheek. "I'm not alone anymore." An image of Lana floated to her mind, brown eyes gazing at her with the slight upward turn to her pink lips. "She'll know what to do with you," she assured the dog. "We'll take care of you, I promise."

Lana rounded the side of the house with her flashlight in one hand and her gun in the other. Without Mary Eunice beside her, her heart hammered in her throat; she lost all grounding, and with each blinding flash of lightning, she saw light reflecting on Thredson's glasses, the particular glow to his eyes; the October chill froze her bare toes like the freezer of his basement, the rain drenching her like his sweat. Her breath hiccuped in her throat. Don't be ridiculous. It's probably just some punk-ass kid trying to scare you. A branch splintered from a tree overhead, and she yelped at the cracking sound. Fuck, if it isn't working.

The pistol weighed her down, its emotional weight dragging her soul. She hadn't touched it since she killed Thredson, and the steel inside her palm poisoned her blood with his voice. Her feet sank into the sodden earth as she rounded into the backyard. "Don't worry. She won't bite. I took her teeth." Her stomach flipped as she scanned the yard. The beam of light reflected on the raindrops, reducing her visibility. But, upon a sweep of the lawn, she spotted nothing, no one.

Swallowing the thickness in her throat, she approached their bedroom window where they had heard the first of the noises. Against the house, several shallow holes sprayed beneath the bushes. "Something was digging," she whispered to herself. Several flaking chips dangled from the paint where the claws had raked the side of the house. Water stood in the holes, all murky and filthy. Probably a lost raccoon. Whatever it is, it's gone now.

Relief, however, did not fill Lana as she turned away to walk back to the house; invisible hands constricted around her throat like a noose. The taste of his sweat and cologne rode the top of her tongue in a syrupy layer which would not vanish regardless of how she gulped at it. Her bare feet in the cold earth quickened as they fled the murder basement, and as she scrambled back onto her own porch, she whipped her head around to look over her shoulder, convinced something had pursued her from the backyard. Don't be ridiculous. "There was something digging—" Lana whirled around to address Mary Eunice, but the nun had disappeared.

Her tongue became a cotton ball, absorbing all the wetness. "Sister?" Maybe she went back inside. She rolled the crucifix adorning the rosary between her fingers for comfort. "Sister? Where did you go?" She entered the front door and laid her gun and flashlight on the table. But only silence answered her, empty, echoing, void of all things Mary Eunice. The hallway formed a black void, exhaling darkness. She isn't there. She would answer. She would always answer.

The nun's voice carried through Lana's mind with more clarity than Wendy's or Thredson's or any other: Mary Eunice at her bedside, hair rumpled and clothing mussed and blood-stained as she promised, "I won't leave,"; Mary Eunice's sleepy but kind eyes as she assured, "I'm going to take care of you,"; the quirk of her eyebrows and nervous tremble to her lips when she soothed, "If you need me, you can always ask. I'll come to you." Mary Eunice would never wait in the dark without answering her, not in the storm, not when they carried enough horror to burden the world between them.

Thumb tracing the figure of Jesus upon the cross, she swung back out into the storm. "Sister!" she
screamed to the wind. "Sister!" She's gone, they took her—she's scared—why the fuck did I leave her? Her numb feet slapped down the steps into the porch, scanning the front yard for any evidence. She hadn't seen a car go by. Turned off the headlights—or maybe she's still close by—maybe she's fighting back. Her knuckles whitened where she clutched the crucifix. All the irrational thoughts built on one another, painting the scenario in her brain like a scene in a story. Mary Eunice tumbled in the backseat of a black car, blindfolded and gagged, hands and feet bound without even her rosary to comfort her—

You're being ridiculous. You haven't even looked for her. She's not dead. Lana closed her eyes, lifted her face into the cleansing shower of rain. Not yet. Her skin wracked into shudders, rose with goosebumps, to fight the chill, but she fought to ground herself in it. When she peered up at the blackness overhead, no moon, no stars, she imagined it could consume her. It was to the sky that she prayed, fingers wrapped around the sacred string of beads, "Please lead me to her."

Lightning split the universe, and Lana shielded her eyes, turned her head to the right to guard against the brightness; the burst of light illuminated an unmoving body beside the house, lying on her side in the dirt, arms outstretched, blonde hair strewn out in the sodden grass. Lana's heart hit rock bottom and shattered it, plummeted through her stomach and landed somewhere outside of her body. "No," she whispered, ragged; paralysis leached her body of all feeling. But with the next flash of lightning, again shedding white light across the motionless body of Mary Eunice, everything exploded. "No!" she shrieked.

Her feet slapped upon the waterlogged lawn and flung murky water like spittle. Parallel in her mind, Wendy's frozen corpse and Mary Eunice's drenched body lay on the same plain. "Mary!" She lost her footing in nature's slippery creation, and she dove like a baseball player to home base. Her hands seized Mary Eunice's arm. "No, no, no—" Her wails tumbled out of her mouth, lips all gnarled in a horrified disbelief.

Mary Eunice jolted upward. "Lana!" Lana yelped in surprise, large eyes somehow widening, face painted like a child who had seen too many horrors. Hands like talons dug into her upper arm. The dog, startled and frightened by Lana's behavior, rolled to sit up. "No—don't run away! Stay!" To her surprise, he quieted at the reassurance, slumping back over in the frigid misery under the pouring atmosphere.

"Lana," she murmured, and as she wriggled to free herself from the painfully tight grip, Lana clung all the more rigidly to her, refusing to relinquish her. "Lana, you're hurting me." Her voice quaked with despair, and at her words, Lana crumpled, folding herself in the middle. "What happened? What's wrong?" How can I help you? The despondent words crawled through her mind. Her hands searched for some place to latch on and soothe Lana, smoothing up her back, tugging her drenched locks out of her face, cradling her weeping face.

As both of her hands framed Lana's face, fingers tangling in her hair, Lana jerked upright and grabbed Mary Eunice's face in turn. She thrust forward, foreheads and noses knocking in clumsy bumbles. Her lips wore the horrified, grieving expression, parted and gnarled downward. "I thought you were dead!" she howled. Her mouth closed to stifle another sob, but it pressed all over Mary Eunice's face, scouring any exposed skin, planting hasty pecks wherever the rain had already kissed her and chilled her.

Each caress of Lana's lips impressed the terror into Mary Eunice's body. She closed her eyes and waited for Lana to slow, to come down and fill the shoes of bravery and courage once more. She is the bravest person I've ever known. "I'm not dead," she promised. "I'm okay. It's okay. I'm fine." As Lana quieted into shivering shoulders and heavy pants, Mary Eunice wrapped her into a close embrace, allowed her to settle. Then, delicate, she pressed her lips to the crown of Lana's head. Lana calmed in her arms, subduing, while Mary Eunice murmured to her ear, "The Lord thy
God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee."

The dog wriggled nearer, close to them, so he could thrust his graying muzzle into Lana's face. With a swathing, pink tongue, he removed the tears from her cheeks. "Are you okay?" Mary Eunice dared to whisper. She thought I was dead. She was worried about me. Her heart wrenched at the thought, warmed and chilled in the same note. Lana cared for her—but Mary Eunice couldn't stand to see her in such pain, so crippled and rattled by fear and grief that she could no longer function. "Lana? I love you. I don't want you to feel this way ever. Tell me how to fix it. Her tongue did not have the eloquence to frame all of the things she wanted to say, so she hushed, desperate eyes on Lana's face.

Solemn and hollow, Lana nodded, and she fumbled to find her feet; Mary Eunice followed her. Both of them wore mud as socks and gloves; it stained their clothing and clung to their hair. As they stood, the dog also heaved to his three good paws, suspending the forth above the ground. Lana gazed down at him for a long moment. "It was him." Her voice came in a mumble. "He was digging holes behind the house." Her eyes narrowed, a purse coming to her lips. "What's wrong with his paw?

"I don't know."

One of Lana's small hands slipped into Mary Eunice's, wet and grimy. "Let's take him inside." I know you're not better yet. I can hear it in your voice. I can see it on your face. Mary Eunice squeezed her fingers. I wish I could comfort you as well as you comfort me. The rosary dangled from Lana's neck, clutched in her other hand like a talisman. She tugged at Mary Eunice's arm to guide her back up the stairs to the porch. "Can he make it?"

The dog whined when he came to the first step and hobbled up it, but when he sprang with his hind legs, he lost his balance and landed back in the muddied lawn. The women followed him. Mary Eunice lifted up his front end while Lana grappled with his hind legs, and together, they helped him up onto the porch. When Mary Eunice opened the screen door, he lumbered into the house, skinny tail weakly wagging and pink tongue dangling out of his mouth. The few steps into the home exhausted him, so he sank onto his bony haunches.

Lana reached for the lamp. It lit up the room. "The power's back on," she stated, numb and flat. She didn't look directly at Mary Eunice, instead preoccupied with the dog. Under the bright light, his skeletal build and scarred frame stood out all the more. "We need to give him a bath." He lifted his head against her hand, seeking an affectionate touch, which she provided in a light stroke, picking the mud off of his muzzle. His butt wiggled under their gazes.

With a combined effort, they managed to wrestle him into the bathtub. Though he was emaciated, he was still large and heavy, and they were exhausted. The storm quieted into wind and steady rain. "Er—stay," Lana ordered the dog. Once he flopped into the bathtub, he curled up on the mat, panting from the exertion.

"I don't think he's going anywhere," Mary Eunice teased, eyes half-open. She turned on the faucet and tested the temperature before she plugged it up, resting on her knees on the tile floor beside the bathtub.

"I don't think he's going anywhere," Mary Eunice teased, eyes half-open. She turned on the faucet and tested the temperature before she plugged it up, resting on her knees on the tile floor beside the bathtub.

Breath wafted across Mary Eunice's face as Lana settled beside her. "Give me your hands." She
extended them into the darkness, and Lana took them, rolled them between her own hands, mopped the grime from them with the utmost care. *This is how she copes. This is how she knows how to handle life.* "There." Her bare whisper rose through the bright light of the bathroom. "Got all that mud off of your pretty face."

As Lana withdrew, a smile and a blush graced Mary Eunice’s face, and she opened her eyes to take the washcloth from Lana. Under the pounding water from the bathtub faucet, she cleansed it, and then she sponged the spittle-like specks of muck from her cheeks and forehead. "I love you," she said, not because she expected to hear it in return, but because she knew Lana needed to hear it. The sweet brown eyes fluttered closed under her touch. "Do you feel better?"

"I'm just—tired." The broken note to Lana's quiet voice tore something inside of Mary Eunice, another piece of her heart crumbling off. *I know. So am I.* They shared their exhaustion like gossip. The dog whined where the water had grown deeper, and Lana lifted her head from where it had fallen, downcast gaze brightening. "Yeah, I hear. You're the one who got us into this mess, you know." The light in her eyes, in spite of its faintness, glowed onward. *We're going to be okay.* Mary Eunice relaxed with a relieved sigh through her nose, shoulders sinking with lost tension.

They soaked the dog, pouring water over him, and Mary Eunice lathered him up in their shampoo so the scents of wet dog and flowers mingled. Fleas fell off of him and drowned in the bath water. The ticks clung to him, more stubborn, so Lana found the tweezers, but she couldn't manage to grab the parasites by their heads. The tweezers folded between her trembling, wet fingers. "Can—Can you?" she murmured to Mary Eunice. "My hands are shaking."

"Sure." Mary Eunice rinsed her hands of the suds in the water and took the tweezers from her. The dog butted his head into her chest when she leaned over him. "Stay." The direct address excited him. His skinny tail lifted out of the water and wagged, slapping Lana in the face. She sputtered, and in spite of herself, Mary Eunice chuckled. "He doesn't know what that means, I guess." Immediately, she knew she had made a mistake in her laughter. Shooting her a look, Lana splashed her again so she landed on her ass. "Really mature!"

Lana dove on top of her. She caught herself on her elbows, breath catching in her throat. *This is just like my dream.* "Mature?" Lana echoed. "I am the champion of Go Fish." Mary Eunice's lips parted in an attempt to defend herself, but before she managed a word in edgewise, Lana's fingertips teased her sides and squishy abdomen.

Their first strokes elicited a giggle from the victim, who attempted to stifle it by covering her mouth, pressing her palm into her lips and pinning them in place, but Lana had no mercy. She placed each jab with expert precision, one into her stomach, one gliding up her back, several at her ribs. The heat of Lana's body flushed against her through their thin, soaked pajamas. Her suppressed laughter ripped free when Lana loosened her hand from her lips. Neither of them anticipated the gleeful shriek, but Lana accepted the cry as a victory while Mary Eunice writhed beneath the intruding fingertips.

Lana's gliding hands sent warm pangs through her whole body. Where she ordinarily hated the sensation, she found herself coiling beneath Lana's touch, unable to stifle her whooped cries for leniency. "Say mercy!" Lana's breath wafted against her cold cheek. "Say it!"

*I won't, I won't, I— "Mercy!" she wailed, giving in. Lana released her, and she slumped back onto the tile floor, breath heaving through her mouth in ragged pants. Her mind galloped through a red haze, seeking the hickory hue of Lana's eyes, which floated just above her, fixed upon her. *She is so exquisite.* Her chest rose and fell in uneven gasps, heartbeat slowing. "You're ruthless," she accused.
But all of the viciousness abandoned Lana's expression, replaced by the upward curl at the corners
of her lips, the haunted hollowness present but shrunken in her eyes. She took Mary Eunice's
hands and tugged her back upright. "I love watching you squirm—hearing you laugh. You don't
laugh enough."

The dog whined in the tub behind them, and they both returned their attention to him once more,
Mary Eunice plucking ticks while Lana rinsed his muddy fur and face. Once they had cleaned him
as well as they could, they drained the dirty water and lifted him out of the tub. He shook
vigorously, spattering both of them, and lumbered out of the bathroom. "I'm going to feed him and
see if he'll let me look at his foot," Mary Eunice said, gaze following the dog where he lay down
by the foot of the bed, unable to walk much farther. "Do you want to take a shower?"

Lana's eyes fluttered wide at the question. "I—" Claws of panic seized her heart, only allayed by
the temporary humor, now returning with a vengeance. Don't be a fool, contradicted the coursing
thought of, I can't leave you yet. The image, a grievous misconception branded into her mind,
floated behind her eyes of Mary Eunice's body strewn out on the lawn like a trophy, legs curled
up in the same position as Wendy's. Fantasy mingled with fantasy as she rolled over a frozen
corpse. Blonde hair clung to frosted cheeks, blue eyes fixed open, bloodied gums flapping. Stop it!
It's not real! The air tasted like sweat and men's cologne.

"Hey." Mary Eunice took her by the wrists. At the sudden contact, Lana choked on her air. "It's
okay." The worry pinched between her eyebrows in a wrinkle, lips quirked as she searched for
some comfort to offer. Lana couldn't control the wobbling of her chin. "Come on. Come with me
and the puppy."

Puppy. The innocence of Mary Eunice's words made her heart skip a beat in her chest. Her lower
lip plucked between her teeth until it ceased its trembling, and she trusted it to speak. "He's one
big-ass puppy." Mary Eunice smiled back at her, blue eyes shining, but she didn't release Lana's
hand; she led the way out of the bathroom like a tour guide through an underground tunnel
walking by memory without a light.

As they went up the hall into the living room, Lana whistled for the dog, who limped after them,
tongue lolling out of his mouth and skinny tail wagging at the attention. "Come here, boy." Mary
Eunice entered the kitchen, and he cast a long look after her before he made his way to Lana. She
sank down to sit in the floor beside him. He rolled onto his back for her to scratch his tummy; with
his good paw, he tapped her forearm, both eyes fixed on her with more adoration than any human
could ever manage—except maybe Mary Eunice. A heavy sigh whistled through his nose when
she absently rubbed his chest.

Mary Eunice returned with a bowl of assorted pink meats; at the sight, Lana crinkled her nose.
"It's spam and bologna. I—I don't really know what to feed him." She placed the bowl of water
on the floor first, and Lana scooted it under his silver muzzle between his paws where he lapped at
it. "What are we going to do with him?" Mary Eunice settled on the floor beside Lana.

The moment their knees brushed, Lana reached for a hand to fill her own, and Mary Eunice
granted it. Palm to palm, fingers interlocking, her spine became rubber; she slumped to place her
head on the supportive shoulder. The scent of rain clung to Mary Eunice's wet clothing and hair.
"We'll take him to animal control tomorrow morning. They'll find his owners."

The dog slurped up the salty meat from the bowl and finished his meal with more water. Then, he
slid back to them, head resting in Mary Eunice's lap. She reached for his wounded leg. "Do you
think he has owners?" He whirled around at the tender hand on his foreleg, mouth open, but he
didn't bite her. With his nose, he tried to nudge her away. "It's okay," she soothed him. He formed
a strangled, yowling sound.
Lana jerked upright and grabbed him around the neck, pinning his muzzle with one hand. *Fuck with her and I'll break your neck.* She curbed the words on the tip of her tongue; they were not directed at the dog, but instead surged to defend anything that dared threaten Mary Eunice, the only sweet thing she had left. Her erratic heartbeat billowed forth, unable to remain calm for than a few minutes before something else triggered her. *Calm down. He's old and hurt. He's no more dangerous than a blind old man in a wheelchair.* She licked her lips. "Can you see anything?"

With an angel’s touch, Mary Eunice bent back the swollen paw for Lana to look. A deep gash oozed yellow pus from his pad. "At least it's not broken." Mary Eunice let his leg slip away, and Lana freed him. "Poor thing." With wounded pride, the dog huffed and curled up farther away from them, shooting Mary Eunice a baleful look. "Do you want to wrestle him if I clean it out and bandage it?"

"Sure." Though the night had burned all of the energy from their limbs, drove them to a hysterical point of exhaustion, Lana stood while Mary Eunice gathered her things. She returned with peroxide, petroleum jelly, and gauze. When he saw them coming, the dog tensed where he lay, but he didn't attempt to flee; Lana held his head in her lap while Mary Eunice cleansed the deep cut and wrapped it. "He'll need to see a vet, then?" she guessed.

"I—I think so, probably." When she let go of his paw, he sat up and thrust his nose into Lana's face, seeking kisses. Mary Eunice beamed. "Look, he likes you." Lana's nose crinkled up. *His breath stinks.* But the sound of Mary Eunice's light laughter relieved the disgust budding in her at his friendly kisses.

When he began to clamber into her lap, Lana batted him away. "I get it—go like her instead. She's the one who found you." Obedient, he headbutted Mary Eunice in the chest so all of her breath puffed out of her lungs, and then he slathered her in his saliva like butter on a piece of toast. "Precious," she teased, dripping sarcasm like honey. The dog wearied soon enough and lounged beside his bowls, keeping them in sight.

The wee hours of the morning quieted over the living room, lit by the dim lamp; the clock read four AM, and with the steady rain pattering at the roof, dawn had not yet given its first beams of light. Lana gazed down at the shag carpet beneath them, the cream color hazing into a blanket of wet leaves beneath roaring thunder. A disemboweled corpse lay beneath the canopy, first the face of the Mexican, then Wendy, then Mary Eunice, then Bloody Face.

Mary Eunice brushed the back of her hand, and she hiccuped in surprise. "Do you want to go to bed?"

No. The prospect of curling up in the darkness in their bed did not appeal to her. "You can go. I'll stay here for a little longer." *I don't want you to leave.* Lana squelched the needy, clingy thought, averting her eyes and crossing her arms over her chest.

"I'll stay with you." Mary Eunice's gaze burned into the side of her cheek. "Lana, what's the matter?" She closed her eyes, screwed up her face at the question. *Of course she knows. Of course she sees.* "You're hurting. What can I do? Let me help you."

"I—I'm fine." Her insides squeezed. Even her journalist's tongue could not spin an appropriate, believable lie. Mary Eunice, in all of her naiveté, was not a fool, nor was she blind. *I just want you to hold me for a little while.* The request died somewhere in her chest. Mary Eunice would agree, and then those butterflies would leap to life in Lana's stomach again. Earlier, when they had first woken, she heard Mary Eunice moaning in her sleep, whimpering her name, and for an immobilizing moment, she thought Mary Eunice sounded aroused. But of course, that wasn't the case. She was a nun, and most likely a straight nun.
Mary Eunice hushed, but her expression remained troubled, the downward purse to her lips framing something almost a pout. "Lana, I..." She drifted off, lost in her thoughts, and Lana straightened to look at her. "I think you should get help." Her eyes stretched wide like saucers, and Mary Eunice scrambled her panicked thoughts into words. "Not that you—I mean—you're not crazy—at least I don't think so—I know a lot of crazy people—you're not—" She gulped around her stammering. "Just someone to talk to, and tell you how to cope with these things."

"I have you," Lana hedged in return. "Don't. Don't place that burden on her. But, while she knew she needed help, she feared seeking it, feared the rebuke any therapist would use against her. No counselor would talk to her and let her sexuality lie like a sleeping dog. They would want to fix all of her—even the parts that weren't broken.

"Me?" Mary Eunice repeated. "I don't have enough sense to make a nickel. I couldn't convert a cucumber to Catholicism if you drew a cross on it." She shook her head, eyes misting over. "Fuck me, I'm a moron. I made her cry again."

"I don't know how to help you, Lana. I'm sorry—I know that's not what you need—but I don't know how to fix it, you can't tell me everything, and when you get so upset, I don't know how to make you feel better. I just want you to be okay."

"I know, and I love you for it." Lana explained, voice soft. "They would be more preoccupied with who I love than what happened to me." She held Mary Eunice's gaze steadily, wanting to impose the strength of her convictions upon her. "I don't expect you to fix anything. You're here. And you listen. I can't ask for any more than that." She trailed a thumb over Mary Eunice's cheek, sticky where the dog had shed his affection onto her. The cupid's bow of her pink lips, the faint dusting of freckles across her nose, drew Lana's attention away from her eyes.

Mary Eunice offered her a hug, and she crawled into it like a turtle into a shell, a badger retreating to its safe den. The rosary dangled around her neck. She removed it and folded it back into Mary Eunice's palm. "Thank you," she said, lifting her eyes upward. "I know what that means to you."

"Not a fraction of what you mean to me." Mary Eunice's assuredness burrowed deep into Lana's heart, condemning in its certainty. It astonished her. A quiver raced down her spine at the electricity crackling between them in the air. But then Mary Eunice broke it. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you." She coiled a lock of Lana's hair around her finger in consideration. "If I had seen you lying out in the storm like that, it would've taken an army of doctors to sedate me."

A frail chuckle rose from Lana's throat. "I shouldn't have tried to drag us both out there into the storm. It was silly. I should've listened to you and stayed inside."

"But we found the puppy." Sighing, Lana's gaze went to the sleeping dog, sprawled out on her rug. Mary Eunice nuzzled her hair, eyes drowsing half-open. "She's drained. I shouldn't keep her up. We should go to bed. But that meant relinquishing the loving embrace surrounding her. Into her hair, Mary Eunice breathed, "I love you."

She said the words with such ease and frequency, but they caught in Lana's throat, no matter how she willed them to come free. Instead, she gave to Mary Eunice, gave her home, her bed, her clothing, her heart. What else could she give? Would a few simple words cripple her so much, especially given that she had already said them when she was pained and disoriented at the hospital? She lifted her lips and pressed them to the curve of Mary Eunice's jaw bone; the blonde hummed in return with a silly, sleepy smile adorning her mouth.

Lana took the pillow and throw off of the couch. "Here. You can stay right here and rest. You need your sleep." A few tired blinks passed, but Mary Eunice breached no argument. She placed her head on the small, square pillow and peered up at Lana, one arm extended in an invitation. *Lie down with her. She wants you.* Her belly trembled. *And I want her.* She lay down beside her on
the floor, and Mary Eunice scooted the pillow out so they could share it, splitting the throw as well. "This should keep your bad dreams away," she murmured as Mary Eunice secured one arm around her middle, their bodies cradled together, limbs and hair strewn about.

She said the words with a grin, but a blush teased Mary Eunice's cheeks. "It wasn't a bad dream," she admitted. "Or—at least, not a nightmare."

"Oh, really?" Lana blinked. Her eyelashes brushed Mary Eunice's skin. "Can you tell me?" Her interest piqued, but she didn't want to demand anything of Mary Eunice, not even an innocent dream sequence. So many things haunted the two of them; she couldn't bear to add to it.

Mary Eunice, however, did not withhold, in spite of squirming with discomfort. "We were in the garden of Eden." Even the tip of her nose turned red. "You were Adam, and I was Eve—I mean, you were still you, but you had a scar right..." Her index finger traced the underside of Lana's ribcage. "Right here. Where God had taken your rib and made me. And we were married in paradise."

"Neither of us ate the forbidden fruit?" Lana pestered, an easy smile upon her face.

"I don't think so. It was very—pleasant."

Mary Eunice's blush darkened, and she stammered over the last word. You're making her nervous. She thinks you'll read too much into it. Lana's broken heart chipped off another piece. You shouldn't think of her that way. She's your friend. It would break her trust forever if she knew. "Then I hope you see something just as pleasant." She tuck a lock of tangled hair behind Mary Eunice's ear. "Sweet dreams." Mary Eunice's wasted body swallowed into sleep the moment she closed her eyes, but Lana remained for a long time, gazing at her silhouette in the dim light and listening to the dog snore from across the room. You are my finest fantasy.

Chapter End Notes

I honestly think this is my favorite chapter so far--not that that means anything.
I would like to thank all of my readers for their continued support. :)

You are my finest fantasy.
Show Mercy and Compassion

Chapter Notes

Chapter title: Zechariah 7:9

The new year has chimed in more responsibilities for me, so my weekly updates might slow to bimonthly; I might also end up posting on a different day of the week, since Thursday is a bad one for me. I apologize for any inconvenience to readers.

Also, I opened a tumblr where I post Raulson and other fandom-related materials. Follow me at thefandomlesbian if you're interested!

Thank you for reading!

A sloppy tongue across Lana's face roused her from her peaceful sleep, sprawled across the carpet with faint morning light piercing the curtains. "Mm," she grunted, "geroff. I'm up." The dog whined in response. A rough paw scraped her cheek. When she batted him away, he whimpered, a long cry drawing louder, threatening to bloom into a howl. "Shush! Sh." Lana sat upright and tucked the throw over Mary Eunice's shoulder. "Don't wake her up. I'll feed you."

The dog had left a foul-smelling gift on the rug, and when she glared at it, he lowered his head. He placed his injured, bandaged paw on the ground with gingerly weight, still limping with each step. "Thanks a lot." She glanced back down at Mary Eunice, knees curled up to her chest, dirty hair strung out on the pillow. Their filthy pajamas had dried but carried dusty stains. Her chest rose and fell evenly, rosary wrapped around her hand. Dried grass clung to her exposed ankles under the skirt of her knee-length nightgown. Fine, white hair gleamed on her calves; Lana's hand lifted and pressed to the inside of her ankle, flicking off the blades of grass and teasing the fuzz with her fingertips. She's radiant. She's the sunlight.

The writer in Lana sought a word which could convey the light exhaling from Mary Eunice's sleeping form, and after turning a few of them within her mind, she landed on one she had learned in college while reading European literature. "Pulchritudinous," she said aloud. It didn't sound pretty, but the many syllables formed onion-like layers of attractiveness, just like the many sweet layers of Mary Eunice. Her frame, her blonde hair and bright eyes, the dusted freckles across her nose, her full cheeks and crooked eye teeth, those things only made a shell of the woman and friend Lana had come to love.

She slid back to touch Mary Eunice's cheek, cradling it in her palm. A smile lifted the corner of her pink lips. Her dimples deepened, and she nuzzled into Lana's hand. Lana smoothed her hair out of her eyes. "Sh, I didn't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep." Her eyebrows quirked together when Mary Eunice stilled under her touch. That's unusual. Normally, she would jump at the first suggestion of lazing around. And she's on the floor. It's not like she could be comfortable. "You feel a little warm." You dragged her around in the rain all night, and now she's sick!

Mary Eunice didn't reply, but goosebumps peppered her arms; a shiver passed through her body. Lana tugged the throw tighter around her. Worry trembled in her stomach. Don't disturb her. Wait until she's awake. The dog pawed her again. "Okay, I'm coming, fido." She took the bowls from the floor and headed to the kitchen, him lumbering after. She filled them with another can of spam.
Lana picked up the offending gift the dog had left her, pitching it in the trash, and then she tiptoed past Mary Eunice, who still slept in the floor, to the bathroom. Dog hair and dead fleas dotted the bottom of the tub. "Gross," she grumbled. *Never thought I'd have a dog in my house.* She rinsed the mess out of the bottom of the tub. *Never thought I'd have a nun here, either, but yet here I am.*

With a heavy sigh, Lana kept her back to the mirror as she stripped herself of her clothing. Her own nude body repulsed her, something regarded with cursory touches and glances rather than the sensuality she had once granted herself. Her hands had become her enemies when they trespassed on her exposed skin. The cold air in the house hardened her nipples, but as she cupped the underside of her breasts, the hair on the back of her neck stood up, feeling a million invisible eyes upon her. Unnerved by the sensation, she pulled the faucet for the shower to start and jumped beneath the hot stream. *It's not healthy for you to fear your own body.* As she lathered her hair with shampoo, she ignored the bleating voice in the back of her mind. Even Mary Eunice knew she was held together by a few loose strings and badly sewn buttons; she fooled no one. *You cannot burden her with your problems. She has enough to handle.*

Perhaps she would never truly leave it behind, never truly win, as he haunted her dreams and followed her around her house, chased her into the arms of a woman she could not have. *I need to go to the doctor. He's going to put me on drugs. I don't want to be doped up.* Lips drawn downward into a snarl, her father came to mind, summoned by the prospect of shoveling pills down her throat to solve her problems. *I'm not going to see a shrink, either.*

Scrubbing herself clean, she hurried out of the shower, knowing Mary Eunice would need to take one; she didn't want to drain all of the hot water. She wreathed herself in a towel. The fog of the room, crafted by the shower's steam, clogged the air and cloaked her from sight. The hot water flushed her skin bright red and tender, scent of soap rising off of her body; with no more mud clinging to her, she dressed herself and headed back to the living room.

Mary Eunice hadn't moved from where she lay, but the dog curled up beside her, whining and nudging her with his silver muzzle when she didn't rise. "Hey, fido!" Lana called, whistling. He limped to her in the kitchen. "Don't bother her. She doesn't sleep enough. If the living room floor is where she crashes, that's where she crashes. Let her alone." She sprayed a pan and cracked a couple eggs into it. "We're taking your stinking tail to animal control, and this will all be a bad dream. Maybe we'll get a few days' peace." *As if.* Lana silenced the mocking inner voice as she scrambled the eggs, but it reminded her of the tumult she had endured, would continue to endure. *I would kill a man to go back to the way things were before.* She had a killed a man—but it hadn't solved anything. It had replaced her lover with a nun, her sanity with a patchy quilt, her sense of security with a pistol, her peaceful sleep with nightmares. *"You don't even know what kind of crazy place you stumbled across, mutt," she remarked to the dog. He lay down at her feet, blocky head resting on his paws; under her friendly gaze, his thin tail wagged. "Don't look at me like you love me. You took a shit on my rug. Unforgivable."*

In spite of her dark words, a smile curled upon her lips, and she dropped him a floppy piece of raw bacon before she put on the next pan to fry. "Let's see how badly I can burn this, shall we?" The dog gobbled up the morsel with a smack of his tongue and cheeks. "If it bursts into flames, you're responsible for getting Mary Eunice. You owe her one. You'd still be groveling out under
the house if she hadn't found you.“ Big, pleading brown eyes fixed upon her, followed her every movement. It's almost like he understands. Oh, don't be ridiculous. It's just a stupid dog. "Knock it off. I already fed you. This is for me and Mary Eunice."

Her resolve crumbled when she burned the bacon, and she tossed him two more charred strips on her way to the kitchen table. "Sister?" she called, tentative, looking to the curled form of Mary Eunice upon the floor. It's not like her. Lana tiptoed around the sofa and knelt beside her, the goosebumps speckling her arms, slight flush to her cheeks. "Hey." She placed a hand on her shoulder and smoothed the sheer fabric of her nightgown where it had dried and clung to her skin. "Hey, sunshine. I made breakfast."

Mary Eunice squirmed under her touch. Her round face screwed up, blue eyes narrowed into slits. "Mm…" Lana observed with a frown, the downward tilt to Mary Eunice's lips, the scrunched texture to her nose. "Wha—What time is it?" She regarded Lana with disorientation, squinting like a hungover person struggling to piece together memories.

"It's—" Mary Eunice wriggled her arm free to sneeze into the palm of her hand. "Bless you," Lana commended. I got her sick. Of course she's sick. You can't drag someone around in a thunderstorm for hours and expect them to be peachi. "It's a little after nine." As Mary Eunice sat up, she shivered, pale hands clinging to the hem of the throw. She sniffled through her nose, glossy eyes scanning the room. Lana extended a hand to press to her cheek, Mary Eunice met her gaze. "You feel warm. You're all flushed. Do you want to lie down?"

"I'm okay," Mary Eunice assured, her voice a thick mumble as her fingers shivered. "Just a little sore." That would be a side effect of sleeping on the floor. Lana refused to consider the stiffness in her own back; her own stupidity had bound her to a night spent in the floor. "Did you burn anything?"

"The bacon." Lana started to chuckle, but Mary Eunice spewed another violent sneeze. "Bless you." Her eyebrows quirked together, and she teased, "You can smell my charred food?"

"I'm fine," Mary Eunice assured her. She wore the same, sleepy smile, but something twinged in her eyes, a shadow passing across her face. You've worn her down. Her pale, haggard face and flushed patches on her cheeks caused Lana's inner protectors to scream in protest. "I could eat. Breakfast passed in relative silence, Mary Eunice fighting to balance breathing and chewing. She slipped both of her burnt pieces of bacon to the dog, who waited patiently under the table in the hopes of receiving some scraps; Lana pretended not to notice as she chopped up her eggs with her fork. Mary Eunice took their plates when they had finished eating, but Lana batted her hands away. "I'll clean up. You should take a shower." When Mary Eunice muffled another sneeze into the crook of her elbow, she continued, "And there's some Benadryl in the medicine cabinet. You look miserable."

Mary Eunice choked on a snort, unable to manage it with her stuffy nose. "Thanks," she replied, dry in her delivery. Lana touched her hand to take the plates and silverware away from her, a
gentle quirk to her lips. "Did—Did we even say good morning?"

The question broke Lana's dark inner musings, stepping out, into the light. "We've got bigger fish to fry." She turned on the faucet of the sink. "Animal control closes at noon. I want to get rid of the mutt before he eats my shoes or something." When Mary Eunice pursed her delicate, pink lips, Lana allayed, "Good morning!" in a chime. In spite of her sick eyes and weak sniffles, Mary Eunice brightened at the greeting. Lana shooed her off to shower.

Once they were both clean, Mary Eunice granted some relief by the medication Lana suggested, Lana used an old belt to fasten around the dog's neck as a collar and leash, and they drove to the animal control center.

Lana parked in a gravel lot far out from the building. In the fenced yards, many large dogs charged about, pouncing at the chain-link fence with deep, ferocious barks. Mary Eunice took out the dog on his belt restraint and into the grass, where he relieved himself. He paid no heed to the other dogs, but at the sight of the pound, he cowered, tail tucked between his hind legs. *Looks like he's been here before.* It struck Lana like a fist in her gut. She didn't dare breathe a word of it to Mary Eunice. "Can you get him to move?" she asked instead, knowing Mary Eunice's unique compassion would sway the dog's conviction.

Mary Eunice squatted and coaxed the dog with her hands outstretched. "Come here, buddy." He sniffed her fingers, but for the first time, distrust shaded his face. He hunkered down in the grass and licked at the fresh bandages Mary Eunice had changed before they left. "Don't do that. Come here, boy. You'll be okay, I promise." She leaned forward to brush his ear, but he flinched away from her touch. "It's loud and scary, isn't it? I bet it doesn't smell really nice, either." The silver muzzle twitched at her quiet words; Lana, likewise, stood, riveted by her quiet address to the frightened animal.

"It's okay to be scared. I get scared a lot. But you'll find someone to help you not be afraid." The tip of his tail twitched, like a wag but not quite accomplishing it. He drew his tongue over the bandages, but his brown eyes lifted from the dirt to fix on Mary Eunice. "The people here are going to help you find where you belong." *She talks to him like he understands.* As the tail thump increased, whiskers fluttering in the chilly breeze, Lana wondered if it was possible. "There's gotta be somebody out there who misses you. They just want to find your—your—"

A sneeze exploded from Mary Eunice, and with it, a string of snot frothed from her nose. *Oh, that's delicious.* Lana bit back the snide remark and reached in her purse for a handkerchief. The dog lunged forward and caught the mucus on the fat of his pink tongue. Mary Eunice's face screwed up while he cleansed her nose to the best of his ability. "That's the most civilized thing I've seen all day," she quipped. Mary Eunice stood, a pink blush coloring her cheeks; she wiped the saliva off of her upper lip with the back of her hand. *She cares so much. She's so loving.* "How did you know what to say to him?"

With a tug on the belt, the dog flanked Mary Eunice, still leery but willing to accompany her. "It's not what you say." She scratched him behind the ear when he whined and pawed her calf. "It's how you say it. I could've told him a recipe for cornbread. It would've been about the same." Eyes averted, resting upon the dog, she continued, "It's like talking to a young child. He doesn't want to know where we're going, exactly, or what we're doing. He wants to know that we're going to be with him and keep him safe."

A wistful note attached to her last sentence. *She would know better than others.* Lana placed a hand on her elbow. *I want to be with you. I want to keep you safe.* If the previous night hadn't demonstrated that, in all of its chaotic, muddy, tear-filled glory, she didn't know that anything could. "Let's go." Mary Eunice sneezed again, and Lana thrust the handkerchief at her. *Here—use that, not the dog.*
Eyes widening, she wheezed a throaty laugh and blew her nose into the handkerchief. "Thanks." She folded the handkerchief and tucked it into the pocket of her skirt. Hand tightening around the belt, she looked to Lana, waiting for direction and instruction, and Lana led the way, face hidden behind sunglasses and a hat, into the small, tin-roofed building.

People crowded around the cement floor, several wearing shirts and name tags that dubbed them volunteers, others leading dogs around. A shepherd with a silver pinch collar lunged at Lana. She staggered back, wielding her purse like a weapon, but the handler dragged the dog back by his throat before he could sink his teeth into her. "That's it!" snarled the beefy man. "Bad dog!" He wore horn-rimmed glasses. Light reflected on the lenses in a bold flash at her eyes.

Smelling their fear, the dog at Mary Eunice's feet wriggled between her legs and refused to budge. "Are you okay?" She tugged the belt to rouse the dog, and he obeyed reluctantly, sidling between them instead.

His tongue brushed the tips of Lana's fingers, and just as Mary Eunice's hand reached for the inside of her wrist, she nodded. "I'm fine." The shred of darkness passed over her, wafted by; the angel of death had seen she marked her door with blood and chose not to claim her soul. The crowd shifted left and right, people leaving with dogs and entering with them. A woman entered with a pet carrier full of mewling kittens. "I didn't realize it gets this busy." The milling mass split and dissipated each time a volunteer or staff member passed through to address a patron.

A family with four young children, the wife round with another pregnancy, arrived and shuffled inside, and they claimed a fluffy golden dog. "Biscuit!" cried the oldest girl. "We missed you so much!" The dog nearly tackled her over while the father shook the hand of the volunteer, thanking them for finding the missing family pet. The family's palpable joy leaked onto Mary Eunice's expression. She's a sponge for emotion.

"Can I help you?" A squat, chubby teenage girl with a volunteer tag reading Bertha greeted them with a clipboard and a pen. Lana cleared her throat, gesturing down at the dog, but before she had a word in edgewise, Bertha squinted at her. "Hold up. You're the ladies from the newspaper, aren't you? Both of you? There was totally a whole article about you yesterday."

Lana resisted the urge to roll her eyes skyward. Instead, she glanced back at Mary Eunice, gauging her reaction, before she proceeded. "Yes, we are. We found this dog—"

"Groovy! That's super cool. I've never met a famous person before." Bertha grinned. She had big braces. "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you. You found a dog?"

"Last night, in the storm. He was trying to dig a hole under the porch. Scared the hell out of both of us."

"Both of you?" Bertha echoed, eyes flicking to Mary Eunice. Oh, shit. Lana shifted nearer to her as she watched the assumptions gallop across the volunteer's face. She bit down on her tongue to keep from pouring the whole story at Bertha's feet, to keep herself from preserving Mary Eunice's honor as a chaste servant of God. But Bertha scribbled on the piece of paper on her clipboard, allowing the notion to pass. "What's wrong with his foot?"

"It has a deep gash. He was limping pretty badly when we found him, but since we cleaned it out, he's getting around better." The elderly, emaciated dog began to pant under Bertha's scrutinizing eyes. He butted his head into Mary Eunice's leg. "We gave him a bath. He was filthy. Fleas and ticks like no other."

She clicked her tongue. "He's not in very good shape. Somebody wasn't taking care of him. He
must've been on his own for a long time." A grim frown drew lines at the corners of her lips, eyes narrowed as she checked off the paper on the clipboard. "I'm going to go out on a limb and assume he hasn't seen a veterinarian and hasn't had any shots." They both shook their heads. "Is he intact?"

"Yes."

"Any idea how old?" They exchanged a glance and shrugged, neither of them having a good idea, except that he had a very gray muzzle. "Alright, I'm going to look in his mouth and see if I can get an estimate. Is he a biter?"

For the first time, Mary Eunice piped up, "No, he's very gentle. He's just a little timid at first. He hasn't lashed out at either of us at all." She met Bertha's gaze for a moment before she looked back down to the cement floor and the dog, who leaned against her leg and rested his uninjured forepaw on top of her shoe.

Bertha grinned. "That makes my job easier." She squatted in front of him and took his large, square head in her hands. "Open wide, grandpa," she encouraged, and as she popped her fingers into his mouth, his jaws parted, lips drawn back and tongue spilling out. "Boy, that stinks. You're missing quite a few chompers." He attempted to smear his tongue across her face, but she dodged, an expert at it. "I'd say he's at least eight years old, maybe nine. He's pushing it for a bully breed. They don't always live long in the city."

Her smile ebbed, and she looked between the two of them; her pitying eyes lingered on Mary Eunice before she decided to address Lana instead. "In the interest of full disclosure, I gotta say—a dog like him, this is the end of the line." Lana's eyes narrowed, brows quirking together, while Mary Eunice pursed her lips into a confused pout, toying with the dog's ear between her fingers. "He needs a lot of care that we aren't able to provide here. He's elderly, injured, and intact—and he's a pitbull to boot. Nobody with kids will want a dog like him in the neighborhood."

She shook her head, clucking her tongue shamefully. "I can take him off your hands, and he'll go on a five-day stray hold to give any owners a chance to reclaim him, but after that, my supervisors will never approve for him to get the care he needs to recover. It's too costly. We've got hundreds of animals to worry about. He'll be euthanized." Lana closed her eyes, a tight breath whistling from her.

"We're putting him on fucking death row if we leave him here—with no chance for appeal. The volunteer pressed, kept speaking, "Now, I don't mean to sway you. If you can't take him, you can't take him. It's painless and humane…" She continued, but Lana didn't hear.

There was Thredson, pacing at the foot of her bed in a crisp white shirt. "I can either cut your throat or I can strangle you." As she rolled beneath the covers, resolve crumbling, pleas tumbling from her lips where she thought she would never beg, he held his own head in his hands. "Oh, Christ, what am I saying?" He paced across the room, taking long strides, irregular and unpredictable. "It doesn't matter how we do it." As he returned to her, he moved slowly, eyes dark and narrow, but she didn't see him, only the leaking needle between his fingers. "We'll put you out. You won't feel a thing."

Mary Eunice's fingers coiled around her wrist and tugged her back down into reality, and she gasped in surprise. "No." The single syllable ripped out of her chest, almost a sob, but she managed to withstrain her tears; she would not cry in public, not again. "No. I won't leave him here to die." At her ear, Mary Eunice whispered her name, a question, as if to say in fewer words, *Do you know what you're saying?* "We'll take him back home with us." *I know what I'm saying. I won't have any more blood on my hands.*

Bertha's taut expression relaxed, and again, the friendly, charming smile replaced her tension. "Are you sure?"
"I'm sure." Lana did not allow herself a moment to hesitate in her answer for fear that it would change, that something in her would rise and abandon the elderly mutt here with the loud dogs and the snarling people and the needles of death only five days away. "We'll keep him."

She beamed at them. "Y'all seriously just made my week. Y'know, I just hate it when I have to sign these papers, knowing what's going to happen. You ladies have a great week!"

Through the front door, Lana led the way, head down and strides quick to avoid someone else recognizing them and calling attention to them. The dog limped after her as fast as he could manage, tongue lolling and tail beating the air forcefully enough to stir a wind. Mary Eunice's troubled expression hadn't faded, and as they loaded up into the car, her eyes bored holes into Lana's cheek. A sneeze broke the silence. The dog whirled around to lick her face again, and his tail whipped Lana in the face.

She swatted it with her hand, but it did little to dissuade the animal. "I'm going to put you in the back seat," she threatened him. "Get your ass out of my face." Mary Eunice shushed him and pulled him down so he perched in her lap like an oversized cat, skinny legs spilling out in all directions.

The adoring brown eyes couldn't decide which woman they liked more, so his gaze bounced between them like following a ping pong ball. "I can't believe I just did that." She turned to face Mary Eunice, desperation mingling with sarcasm. A sad, teasing smile found its way to her mouth. "Where were you? You're supposed to be my voice of reason. You know, like, 'That's a bad idea, you shouldn't drink two bottles of wine in one night,' or, 'You shouldn't run out into the storm wearing your pajamas,' or, 'You shouldn't agree to take stray dogs.'"

Mary Eunice averted her eyes, wearing a sheepish smile. She ran her hand down the dog's ridged spine, lingering in the valleys between his vertebrae before she tackled the next mountain. "I was praying for someone to come in and save him," she confessed, gazing down at the floorboards of the car. "I just didn't expect it to be you."

A heavy sigh puffed from Lana's nose. "Neither did I." The dog extended his injured paw at her, rested the bandaged appendage upon her thigh. But it's not that bad, is it? He's friendly. We can take care of him. The optimistic voice in her head sounded somewhat like Mary Eunice had jumped into her mind and encouraged her from behind her ear. The literal angel on my shoulder.

She cranked the car and rumbled out of the gravel parking lot. "What are we going to do?" Mary Eunice asked, meek, like she feared the worst of Lana's intentions.

"I'm going to stuff him into a canvas bag and tie it up, and then we're going to throw him over the side of a bridge into the river."

"Lana!" she cried, aghast, and Lana grinned at her gullibility; at her expression, Mary Eunice quieted, blush tingling her cheeks—though it hardly differed from the flush of sickness and fever she already carried. "You can't scare me like that," she muttered, dark. "What are we really going to do?"

"It's only a slice of vengeance for praying us into owning a dog." Lana stopped at a sign and turned onto another street. "We're going to take him home and pick up some stuff from the market for him, and then I'll call the vet on Monday to see if we can make him an appointment." The dog nuzzled at Lana's side with his gray muzzle and black, leathery nose, and she scratched him behind the ears. His tail thumped against Mary Eunice's chest. She quieted, pensive with her eyes drawn almost closed. She's exhausted. That Benadryl is making her sleepy. "You could stay home and rest," Lana offered, careful in her words, considering them as she spoke them. She didn't want
to leave Mary Eunice at home alone—the mere thought painted a thousand horrific scenarios in her mind, each worse than the one preceding but all of them equally unlikely.

"No, I—I'm fine." Lana cast her a sideways glance. *Are you sure?* "I would rather be with you." She said the words with her eyes cast away in shyness, like she didn't trust Lana to accept them. "If you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind. But you don't feel well. You should catch up on your sleep a little. I kept you out all night."

The sleeve of her blouse rolled up, Mary Eunice picked at the scabs lining her arm, loosened them. At the scent of blood, the dog whirled around and dragged his tongue over the opened wounds. "I was with you when you needed me. That's more important." As an afterthought, she added in a whisper, "And now we have dog."

When they stepped out of the car into the front yard, a cold breeze buffeted them. The clouds gathered, gray and heavy, overhead and spat flakes of snow; the muddy ground had hardened into uneven chunks underfoot. The dog limped over them, Mary Eunice following in the hopes he would relieve himself in the yard rather than in the house. To her great fortune, he lifted his leg on the rose bushes. "Good boy!" she praised with a broad smile. *He's going to kill the yard,* Lana grumbled internally. *Better than the carpet. Hope the neighbors don't bitch.*

The dog's butt wiggled with the force of his excitement, and Mary Eunice led him back up to the porch, where he waited for help up the steps. "Don't lift him by yourself," Lana dissuaded as Mary Eunice stooped over to grab him. "Good god, he's going to weigh a ton if we fatten him up." With his tail, he slapped Lana in the face as she looped her arms around his hind quarters. Mary Eunice seized him around his deep chest and received a smattering of licks across the face as thanks.

He scrambled away, into the house when Lana opened the door, but as Mary Eunice stood, she swooned. Lana caught her by the arm when she began to teeter and held her steady. "Hey." Dazed blue eyes fought to focus on Lana, dilated until she spoke. "Are you okay?"

Mary Eunice blinked a few times. "Yeah," she said, hesitant. "I'm just—a little dizzy. I'm okay." She pushed a smile upon her pink lips, but Lana wasn't reassured, the quirk lingering between her eyebrows and on her face, crinkling the corners of her eyes. "I'm fine," Mary Eunice insisted, this time with a little more strength. "You don't need to worry. You look like you're trying to decide where to plot my grave."

A wry laugh tugged itself out of Lana's chest, and she entered the house, holding the door open for Mary Eunice. "You know how I feel when you look at me like I'm about to keel over on the spot." She freed the dog from his belt collar and refilled his water bowl. When she returned with the bowl but no food, he whined, jowls dangling and whiskers quivering, big brown eyes fixed on her like she had broken his heart. "You just ate this morning," she reminded him. "We'll feed you real dog food when we get back. Spam and bologna can't be good for you."

The dog turned his head to Mary Eunice, thick tongue flitting out from between his jaws in the hopes she would relent and bend Lana's will. Stifling a hoarse chuckle, Mary Eunice shook her head. "Lana said no," she reported to the dog, whose tail thumping slowed, ears flattening. He drank from the water bowl, spattering slobber everywhere, and then he retreated to the front of the sofa where he lay down, facing the television like he intended to watch the news.

Lana inclined her eyebrows as he relaxed. "How many shoes do you think will be destroyed by the time we get back?"
"We could be optimistic and hope none?" Mary Eunice suggested.

"I prefer to be pessimistic." Lana cast her a sideways look. "I'm either right or pleasantly surprised." Mary Eunice giggled, her hand fluttering to her mouth to muffle the sound; the sound took a nasal texture with her stuffy nose, but with the dimples upon her cheeks, Lana's heart skipped a beat. She's so cute.

That particular adjective didn't occur in Lana's vocabulary often, as she preferred to apply it to children and puppies and kittens, its brand of innocence incongruous with anyone Lana had found attractive before. "Let's go. We can grab lunch while we're out." Lana allowed a grin to intrude upon her face. Smiling felt foreign recently, something not easy to come by but rather painful and difficult to initiate. But when she smiled at Mary Eunice, it became more natural. "I don't want you sneezing all over my food and giving me whatever you got." She winked as they left the house together, locking the door behind them.

In the store, Mary Eunice shadowed Lana into an aisle she had never explored before; the label above their heads reported it held pet supplies. Pet supplies, Mary Eunice thought, incredulous.

She had never before considered the prospect of caring for an animal, and yet, here she followed Lana, loyal as ever and seeking dog food. Lana stooped over at the fifty pound bag of dog food, eyes narrow. "Do you think he'll live long enough to eat all of this? It's the best deal."

"I— What kind of question is that? To her great fortune, a tingling in her nose sent her scrambling for the handkerchief and stole her ability to answer Lana's blunt question. She buried her face into it. As she sneezed, the dull throb from the back of her neck pulsed through her skull once again. Her nose tingled, her throat ached, and her ears itched. Her skin burned with sensitivity where the clothing brushed it. Each cold draft of mid-October sent her tugging at her sweater sleeves to try and warm her arms.

Lana grabbed the bag and lifted; Mary Eunice scrambled out of her own head. You've got a cold. Stop being so pathetic. "Let me help." She took the other side of the bag to split the weight between the two of them. "You'll hurt your back," she cautioned Lana, earning a sarcastic eye roll, punctuated by the upward curve to the corner of her lips. She looks so nice when she  smiles. Her heart heated at the thought.

"Look who's talking." They dropped the bag into the cart. A feather tickled the inside of Mary Eunice's chest, and she coughed into the collar of her turtleneck. Her chest seized and quivered in an audible wheeze. Lana's voice lost its sardonic flavor, eyes softening when she advised, "Take it easy." She selected a couple cans of dog food in various flavors, and Mary Eunice pushed the shopping cart after her. "Do you think we could teach him tricks?"

Following Lana's gaze to the dog treats, Mary Eunice shrugged. "It would be nice if he learned to use the bathroom outside." She cleared her throat, but the phlegm coated the rough, raw passage again. It hurt to swallow. It's just a cold. Stop whining, you idiot. "If that counts."

"That's the most important trick of all." Lana took two bags of them. "It's not like they'll hurt his figure. He deserves to fatten up." She selected a black collar and leash and a few squeaky toys. "Maybe he'll eat these instead of our clothing." She squeaked one of the toys, a fluffy brown squirrel, and chuckled. "As if he could catch a squirrel."

"He hasn't eaten any shoes yet," Mary Eunice defended.

"He's a dog. I won't trust him until he's proven his character. I've seen One Hundred and One Dalmatians." What? The confusion must have crawled upon her face, because Lana elaborated, "It's a movie about a bunch of puppies and a mean old woman who wants to make a fur coat out of them."
Lana tossed a set of bowls into the cart as Mary Eunice murmured, "That's horrible," with her lips pursed. "Why would someone want to do that? It doesn't make any sense."

"It isn't supposed to make sense. It's a children's movie, and she's just the villain." She lingered on the plush beds; Mary Eunice watched her weigh them, one larger than the other but also more expensive. "They're always easier to see in movies. They want to skin puppies, or eat babies, or something silly like that. Not like real life."

The largest bed flopped on top of the bag of food, and Mary Eunice blew her nose into the handkerchief again. Her head ached, pulsing behind her eyes and making Lana's form shimmer like a mirage on the desert. *Suck it up. It's not like you've never been sick before.* The sudden onset of the symptoms surprised her—usually, illness gave her more warning and time to prepare—but it didn't change the fact that she had a common cold, not pneumonia. Lana walked out of the aisle, and Mary Eunice followed her with the shopping cart. "Where are you going?" she asked, dim and thick. The bright lights of the store glowed down and cast a halo around everything, stinging her eyes.

"I'm getting you some decongestants and cough syrup." She selected a box of pills and a bottle of cough syrup, which sent Mary Eunice's lips into a sulky scowl; she resisted the urge to object, citing she would rather cough up her lungs than choke on that particular concoction. *Don't be such a stupid baby,* she cursed herself.

Lana bought their few items, and on the way out of the store, she paused at the engraving machine. "Hold up. We should get him a tag to put on his collar." Mary Eunice gave a few bleary blinks as she halted beside Lana; already, Lana slid her quarters into the machine and selected the simple circle arrangement. "Shit."

Eyes unfocused, Mary Eunice looked above the machine to the calendar. It hadn't been turned since August. *What?* Focus, you idiot. Her brain fought a fog separating her from Lana and any participation in their conversation.

"He has to have a name." Lana's lower lip plucked between her teeth as she considered. "What are we going to call him?"

Mary Eunice pushed up the sleeve of her sweater to pick at the scabs on her arm. Each pinch reminded her to look at Lana, to think on the task provided her. *Sister Jude would have you caned if you acted like this.* "Um—It doesn't matter to me. I'll call him anything." You're so helpful. "Er—I think Fido is nice. But you can call him whatever you want. What's your favorite name?"


"Then call him Johnny."

"No, that sounds silly. I don't want to be shouting, 'Johnny!' across the dog park. It's a kid's name, not a dog's name." The machine idled, waiting for Lana to input a name. Mary Eunice flicked one loose scab off of her arm onto the floor. "What was your father's name?"

*Oh, goodness.* "Herbert," Mary Eunice murmured, sheepish. They exchanged a glance before they both giggled, Mary Eunice sniffing around hers. "Please don't call him that." As she wiped her nose, she asked, "What was your father's name?"

"Landon." *That's nice.* Before Mary Eunice could give her approval, Lana shook her head. "I'm not calling the dog that. I was named after him—and he threw me out. He doesn't deserve the recognition." Lana rocked onto her heels, arms crossed, while Mary Eunice glanced back up at the calendar, seeking some inspiration. *Is it appropriate to pray for guidance in this situation?* She
chewed the inside of her cheek while she considered. Of course, she could pray about anything—God wouldn't smite her if she requested a little misplaced help—but she didn't want to distract from more pressing matters, like the war in Vietnam or the starving children in Africa. And your prayers already got you in trouble once today. "What are you looking at?"

"Oh—um, the calendar." Mary Eunice nodded upward to its place on the wall. "It hasn't been turned since August." August. The month's title repeated in her mind like a decade of Hail Mary beads. Gust? It was stormy last night. No, that's stupid. But her tongue operated without her consent. "What about Gus?" she suggested, meek and timid.

"Gus." Lana mulled it over for a moment. "I like it. It's cute." She keyed in the name before they could debate it any longer. "It suits him. He looks like a Gus." When she finished inputting the rest of her information, the machine spat out the dog tag. "Now we can't say he isn't ours. If he runs off, somebody will know who he belongs to." She took the tag and clipped it to the collar. "Let's go get something to eat."

They split the bags between them as they walked back to the car, leaving the shopping cart in the store. Phlegm coated Mary Eunice's tongue and throat; the prospect of eating anything sickened her a bit, so when Lana asked her where she wanted to go, she shrugged. "Anywhere you want to go." She had eaten in so few restaurants in her life, she hardly had an opinion on the best ones in town.

The cold wind stung their faces when they loaded the car, and Mary Eunice caught the dribbles from her runny nose on her handkerchief. I hope Lana doesn't want this back. The piercing weather sent her lungs to quivering in her chest, heaving into another fit of dry coughs. Her chest contracted like ropes wrapped around her ribcage and pulled taut. By the time she sucked in another whole breath with no rattling inside it, black spots dotted her vision, and Lana gazed at her like she feared she would collapse on the spot. "I'm okay." Her raw vocal cords strummed into a hoarse curl of words. She gulped around the swelling in her throat. Each swallow burned.

Lana's skeptical look didn't fade, the wrinkle appearing between her brows, which told of her internal contemplation. Mary Eunice awaited her verdict, but the frown held steady in silence until she extended a hand to press against Mary Eunice's flushed cheek. The chilled hand elicited a shiver down her aching spine. "You're still warm." With the back of her hand, she touched Mary Eunice's forehead. "Did you take some Tylenol?"

"Mhm." Mary Eunice wiped her dripping nose and sniffed. "Your hands are cold." Her skin pulsed with discomfort where Lana touched it. It's just chilly. You're just sore. Who wouldn't be? "I'm fine," she dissuaded, as Lana's unconvinced frown still clung to her lips. "I caught a little chill last night. It's just a cold."

"A cold shouldn't give you a fever." Lana retracted her hand. "We'll get something to eat, and then you can rest at home. I don't want you to get sicker." As an afterthought, she added, "And I don't want you to give it to me, either."

"I don't need to rest," Mary Eunice pressed. "I'm fine." The throbbing behind her eyes did not lessen when she closed them, but rather it pulsed in bright colors on the backs of her eyelids, making patterns in red and yellow and shaping faces with weird mouths.

Lana grunted at the impasse they had reached and drove away from the store. "Is Waffle House okay? I haven't been there yet. It's new." Mary Eunice nodded; she had never heard of the restaurant before, so she had no opinion of it except that it sounded like it served good breakfast. "Cool. It's on the way home."

The road hummed with cars and pedestrians and cyclists, young people mulling about and
smoking cigarettes; Boston had come to life in the gray, chilly Saturday as children splashed in puddles and slung mud at one another in the park, elderly friends sharing benches and watching birds. The smattering of snowflakes, which melted before they hit the ground, did not deter the civilians. A few businesses and houses had already decorated themselves in preparation for Halloween with lumpy spiders and orange pumpkins. "Are you going to pass out candy for Halloween?" Mary Eunice asked; she hadn't realized how close the holiday had drawn.

A heavy sigh fluttered from between Lana's lips. "I don't think so. Nobody will bring their kids to have queer-tainted candy—and there are probably a couple teenage smartasses out there just waiting to dress up as Bloody Face and scare the shit out of me." The large Waffle House sign protruded from the main strip, dangling alongside a few other businesses. Lana switched lanes and turned into the crowded lot. "Of course, it's busy." She took her purse, and Mary Eunice followed her out of the car up toward the restaurant.

Chattering voices and cigarette smoke filled the air when they entered. It stung Mary Eunice's eyes, which began to run, and she dabbed them with her fingertips. Nervousness flipped her belly. She picked at her arm again until Lana brushed the sleeve back down and met her gaze in the gray. With so many eyes nearby, they could not hold hands; the public would not understand a nun in plain clothes and would see nonexistent things. Embarrassment warmed her at the prospect of someone else seeing her and Lana. You shouldn't be embarrassed. You haven't done anything wrong. Her hands wrung in front of her body regardless.

They sat at a booth where Lana began to peruse the menu. "What do you want?" she asked as she thumbed through the pages. "They have more options than waffles, by the way."

"Um—I don't know. Waffles are fine. I'm assuming it's their specialty."

Lana laughed while Mary Eunice sneezed. Her bright, gleaming teeth under lipstick red lips made Mary Eunice reflect the expression, a small grin, reducing her misery if only a margin. She's so pretty. She folded her napkin into her lap. Broken Bible verses twisted in her mind, snippets bending to describe Lana, each one triggering a flush of heat to her cheeks; she celebrated her illness so no one would notice the difference.

Fearfully and wonderfully made. Strength and honor are her clothing, and she shall rejoice in time to come. Who is this that appears like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession?

A waiter approached their table with his notepad flipped back, pen clutched between his fingers. A silvery trickle ran down his temple, and a stench of smoke clung to his clothing. He didn't look up at them. "Can I get y'all started with some drinks today?" The question had a blunt texture, bearing no interrogative tone.

Mary Eunice glanced up at Lana, but Lana nodded to her, so she stammered, "Um—I just want water."

"Lemon with that?"

"No, thank you."

He scribbled it down. "And for you, miss?"

"Sweet tea, if you have it."

"No, ma'am, but I can bring you some sugar packets to put in it." He glanced up from his notepad with a consumer friendly smile beginning to grow on his face, but as he spotted Lana, it froze and then rolled away; dark eyes glittered with chill. His grip on the notepad tightened so the paper crumbled at the edges. "Excuse me." His tone could have sliced through diamonds. "We don't
Your kind. The words echoed in Mary Eunice's mind, throbbing with each pulse of her headache. Her brow furrowed in confusion as she looked to Lana. We're both white. And that's illegal now, anyway, isn't it? Lana exchanged a glance with her, face creasing with pain before she returned her attention to the server. Oh no. He doesn't mean black people. He means gay people. "I'll have to ask you both to leave. Your presence may disturb the other patrons." He narrowed his eyes. "There are children here."

Mary Eunice swallowed around the painful, swollen lump in her throat, as she remembered the joking words Lana had uttered on the night they danced. "Congratulations, Sister. You're an honorary dyke. Gay by association." Her stomach sank, and she sought Lana's gaze, hoping to model after her and escape with her skin intact.

A second, older, burlier man strode from between the other tables, where a few of the other families had begun to eyeball them. "Jackson? What's going on here?" He stood tall with his hands on his hips, appraising them. His tag named him Harold and marked him as a manager.

"A couple of queers." The young man's lip curled as he regarded them. Oh, no. A frigid snake writhed in Mary Eunice's stomach. Sweat sheened her palms; she wiped them off on her skirt and sought Lana's reassuring gaze, but Lana had closed her eyes, mouth pinched into a disbelieving line. "The government already told me I gotta serve niggers. They ain't said nothing about no queers."

Somewhere beyond them, a child's voice peeped, "Mama, what's a queer?" and a woman shushed him, shooting the fiasco a baleful look. The rest of the restaurant had quieted with eyes fixed upon them. We're not doing anything wrong! Mary Eunice wanted to protest. Her whole life, she had never fathomed a scenario wherein a restaurant saw fit to throw her out. But she had chosen this. She had chosen to befriend Lana, and she had no regrets. God, guide us.

Harold's round face reddened, veins swelling in his neck. "You're despicable." His voice emerged an inhuman growl, words hardly distinguishable from the underlying threat. "Get out." They remained frozen in their seats, Mary Eunice's eyes moving from the manager to Lana, whose mouth formed a gaping O. "Get out!" he snarled. Spittle sailed from his mouth.

Lana scrambled for her purse and hurled herself out of the booth, where she hesitated, waiting for Mary Eunice, but as she stood, the hem of her skirt caught on a protruding metal staple in the booth and hung. No, no, no… Anxious hands, quivering and unsteady, tore at the fabric to try and free herself without damaging it. She couldn't focus on the catch with her frenzied eyes tossing over her shoulder, waiting for the man to lunge at any moment. Her nose poured snot, and she couldn't catch it with her handkerchief.

However, he had his predatory watch upon Lana. Lana gulped and stepped forward with outstretched hands to try and loosen the caught skirt, but like a football player, he slammed into her, sending her sprawling across the tile floor. "Lana!" As she rolled over, dazed, the man lunged again, a meaty hand fastening around one of Lana's forearms. "Leave her alone! Keep your hands off of her! Don't touch her!" Mary Eunice's voice trembled as she spoke.

He whirled back upon her. Her eyes fluttered wide, and she jerked the skirt, tearing the cloth and freeing herself. Like a frightened deer, she leapt toward the narrowing gap of freedom, but sticky hands clutched a fist full of her hair and snatched her back. Pain tore through her scalp, and she yelped. He slammed her against the table. Through his clothes, something firm prodded her in the abdomen. Oh, goodness—that's his penis. The power instilled in him by overpowering and frightening two women had given him an erection. Tears stung behind her eyes. God, give me strength. Please, don't let him hurt me. As the erection poked her again, she gulped for breath.
through her mouth, nose too stuffy and runny to manage. He blocked Lana from view. The unpleasant, bitter taste of tobacco smoke clung to his breath.

"What did you say to me, bitch?" Her face crumpled, resolve dissolving. Please protect me and Lana. The man snatched her hair again. She cried out at the splitting pain through her head. "What did you say to me?" She managed a few senseless blubbers, forming no words when he wrenched her by her hair. "See how brave you are now. You just haven't found the right man to put you in your place yet."

Foolish bravery inundated her brain, something within her rearing its head and refusing to bow to the man's will, refusing to let him take what he wanted. In a bare, weak whisper, she managed, "Jesus is the only man I need."

He backhanded her with such force that her neck cracked, and then he spat in her face, the goo of his saliva sliding down her cheek. He hurled her at the floor, but Lana caught her and held her upright. Her slender arms wrapped around Mary Eunice's waist. The sweet smell of Lana's hair wreathed around her, protected her like a thick winter coat. "Get out of my restaurant!" belted the manager. "Before I call the police!"

With his bellowing, every eye in the restaurant fixed upon them, some pitying, some self-assured, some disgusted, some frightened. None of them spoke. Lord, have I done something wrong? Why are they doing this to us? Lana marched her forward, between the tables, ushering like a parent guiding a wayward child. Mary Eunice did not lift her eyes from the floor. Hot breath crossed her earlobe. They passed through the front door into the cold air onto the sidewalk.

Once they stood clear of the entrance, Lana stopped and used a tissue from her purse to mop the spit from Mary Eunice's cheek. "Disgusting bastard—" Her hands and voice quivered. She combed Mary Eunice's hair back out of her eyes; she winced at the light touch on her sore scalp. "Are you out of your mind?" At the quiet accusation, Mary Eunice stiffened in surprise, lifting her gaze from the ground to Lana's teary face. "Or were you trying to make a martyr of yourself?"

"He hit you," she defended. She's right. You're an idiot. That man could've killed you. You don't have enough sense to keep your mouth shut. You don't have enough sense to make a nickel. "He was going to hurt you. I had to do something."

"So you decided to let him hurt you instead?"

Greater love hath no man this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Mary Eunice restrained the verse from leaving her tongue, knowing it would infuriate and upset Lana. "Better me than you," she mumbled instead. Lana's brown eyes glistened in the afternoon light, sun tinting her hair almost red. She had scrapes on her palms. "Are you okay?"

A wry snort left Lana's nose, and she shook her head, eyes closed and mouth pursed. "I'm fine. You're the one who just got dry-humped by some fatass with high blood pressure." Mary Eunice's stomach burbled at the memory of his erection jabbing her in the abdomen, his heavy hands on her body, in her hair. Her scalp smarted where he had grabbed her hair. Lana's fingers traced the outside of the bruise forming on her cheek. "Did he hurt you?"

"I'm okay." Lana's fingertips on her feverish skin stung and ached, but Mary Eunice didn't pull away; having Lana so near soothed her, even with the flushes of pain that accompanied. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have antagonized him." As the wind blew, she shuddered, lungs seizing into another coughing fit.

Lana shed her coat and draped it over Mary Eunice's shoulders. "Let's get you home. You're sick. You shouldn't be out in the weather." Mary Eunice caught the coat in front of her chest as a
strange emotion filled her from the stomach upward, bubbling like a pot of boiling water. It was just a coat, but her heart skipped like Lana had given her a bouquet of roses. "It's not your fault," Lana murmured. She walked so near to Mary Eunice's side, the backs of their hands brushed, but they didn't grasp one another yet, still too public to risk anything of that sort. "He shouldn't have put his hands on you." Lana's hands balled into fists, and she crossed her arms, eyes narrow with fury, mouth drawn into an expression of pure loathing.

Once they had settled in the car, Mary Eunice leaned back in her seat, chin wobbling. She found her handkerchief and blew her nose wiped her tear-streaked cheeks with the backs of her hands. She lifted a hand to press to the swollen, inflamed spot on the back of her head, and she winced when she found it.

"Let me see." Lana leaned over, and Mary Eunice craned her aching neck obediently. When Lana's fingertips probed the spot, she squeaked. "I'm sorry." She plucked free a few loose strands of hair. "God, your beautiful hair. That son of a bitch." A single tear fell from Mary Eunice's eye, and Lana caught it on the knuckle of her index finger. "I'm sorry," Lana repeated, softer this time. "He was after me. You got pulled into my mess. You didn't deserve any of that. It wasn't meant for you."

"Your mess is my mess," Mary Eunice insisted. She glanced up at her, met her eyes to deliver the words. "You're the Naomi to my Ruth. 'For whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.'"

A weak grin came to Lana's red-stained lips. "You have a Bible verse for almost any occasion, don't you?" Mary Eunice ducked her head, sheepish, and Lana kissed her bruised cheek in reassurance. Her eyelids fluttered closed to embrace the sensation, the warmth and the wetness of Lana's lips. Did she leave a lipstick smear? Mary Eunice didn't care. In all of her sick misery, she was glad to have Lana nearby, to have her steadfast presence at her side.
Outside the house with bags of dog supplies between them, loud barks echoed through the walls. "We're being welcomed home," Mary Eunice murmured in response to Lana's baleful look.

Lana sighed through her nose, a headache throbbing between her temples. She had knocked her face on the tile floor of that damn restaurant, and now her teeth were rattled and her tongue bleeding where she had bitten it. The dazed moment she had lain on the floor had given the man just enough time to hurt Mary Eunice, just enough time to pin her down and grab her hair and slap her around like a ragdoll. By the time she scrambled back to her feet, she only had the opportunity to catch Mary Eunice from his rough arms, her face all tear-streaked and pink and snotty. You are a lousy friend. He could've been strangling her, and you were lying on the floor like it was a tanning bed or something.

She popped the door open and entered, returning the keys to her pocket. Whistling, she called, "Gus! Here, boy!" and the dog rocketed out of the living room; he still favored his injured paw, but he pounced up to paw at Lana's chest. He thrust his gray muzzle into her plastic bags. "Hey—get down. That's not nice. You're going to have to learn some manners." Mary Eunice massaged the swollen section of her scalp with her fingertips as she walked past them into the living room. He really hurt her. She's going to be losing some hair.

Gus swatted his good paw on her hand. "Ugh—your feet are all wet!"

From the living room, Mary Eunice called, "Uh—Lana?" Lana pushed Gus off of her and followed Mary Eunice; Gus darted after her, his tail whipping into a black blur like a fan. She drank in the sight of the living room in silence—what remained of the living space, anyway. Dear god. The couch pillow laid in tatters on the floor. A large tear in the arm of the couch gave way to yellow stuffing, scattered around the room. He had flipped the coffee table onto its back, one leg snapped off. A pile of shit was the centerpiece of the chaotic meal. Mary Eunice turned her head, looking to Lana for answers.

Don't yell. Lana gulped to ensure her first response stayed stuffed inside her. Instead, she managed a whisper. "I'm starting to think this whole dog thing was a bad idea." Mary Eunice's lips pressed into a thin line. She set down her bags and went to the kitchen, emerging with a roll of paper towels. "Don't—Oh, god, you don't have to do that. I'm the idiot who said I wanted his ass.

A small grin reached Mary Eunice's mouth, the lower lip busted in the corner where the man had struck her. "I don't think you have a good idea of how many diapers I've changed in my life." She picked up the excrement in her paper towel. "At least it's solid." Lana almost gagged at the prospect of loose shit staining her carpet. The stench of it permeated the room, and Mary Eunice carried it away while Lana thought of a pleasant garden near the beach to settle her stomach. You would have made a terrible mother.

Gus whined beside her, and she whipped her gaze upon him; he cowered and tucked his tail at her sudden movement. Don't. You'll only scare him. "You're more trouble than you're worth, you know," she griped at him. She placed her bags beside Mary Eunice's and began to gather the
shredded cotton remnants of the pillow. "Look at this. Wendy bought this. You ate it. One day, someone is going to buy you something nice, and I'll eat it." He didn't rouse from where he lay on the floor, beginning to roll belly up at her accusing tone. "The couch isn't much of a loss—we found that at a dump. She just had to have it. She was definitely stoned. We found a pair of boxers in it the next day. Jesus, why am I telling you this? You're a dog. You don't care."

Mary Eunice returned to the living room with the sewing kit. She sniffed and wiped her nose before she sat down beside the tear in the couch, gathering up the yellow stuffing and shoving it back inside. Good god, she's miserable, and she's cleaning up your mess again. Fuck martyrdom. Lana took her by the shoulder. "Hey—no. Don't worry about that right now. You need to rest. You don't look good."

"I'm fine, Lana." You keep saying that. A shiver passed through Mary Eunice's shoulders, skin all twitchy, like the slightest touch stung her. "If I don't sew it up, it'll just lose more stuffing."

"But you'll sew it up, and then you'll lie down for a few hours?" Lana pressed, too stubborn to let the notion slip through her fingers. Something quelled within her when Mary Eunice sneezed again. "Bless you. You're overreacting. She knows how she feels. A cold never killed anyone. Her instincts told her otherwise. Your instincts are paranoid of losing her."

"I'm going to make lunch."

Like hell you are. Lana crossed her arms and arched an eyebrow. "I don't know about you, but I'm eating some cake for lunch." Mary Eunice probed the injured section of her scalp again with her fingertips, a wince crossing her face in a shadow. "I wonder if you could put ice on that or something," she mused aloud. "It's starting to bruise."

Tired blue eyes rose up to her from the floor. "Let me fix the couch, and then I'll do whatever you want me to do until dinnertime, okay?"

This answer sated Lana, as she quieted and nodded. She cut herself a generous slice of cake and poured some milk, and then she made Mary Eunice a bologna sandwich, knowing better than to give her some cake. She cut off the bread crust and threw it away before she brought the meager lunch to her. "I'm going to call Lois. She'll know what to do about your hair. She's really good at that sort of thing."

Mary Eunice threaded a needle and looked back up at her. "Thank you." The grateful glow touched her expression, honest and without expectation. Her hands trembled, and as the head of the needle plunged into her fingertip, she flinched. "Ouch."

"Careful." Lana resisted the urge to caution her more or urge her away from the task at hand; she had earned a compromise from Mary Eunice, who always preferred her hands and mind busy, and she didn't want to change the terms of the agreement and risk Mary Eunice's refusal. Instead, she kicked the broken leg of the coffee table out of the way. "I'll fix that later." Or I'll just pitch it. She had seldom walked through the living room without cursing how it stood in the way, and many drunken nights, she or Wendy had tripped over it and landed in the floor.

Even a day old, the chocolate cake with glowing white icing tasted marvelous, sweetening the tip of her tongue. Good god, I wish it was my birthday more than once a year. Maybe I can convince her to bake me a cake on her birthday. She washed down the rich, savory flavor with a few gulps of milk. The moist texture flaked apart in her mouth. And she was worried it would come out flat. That dumb restaurant wouldn't have had anything this good, anyway.

The sweaty manager appeared in her mind again, and she set her jaw, hands clenching into fists. She pictured herself winding up, swinging, connecting with his jaw hard enough to crack her
knuckles. She imagined a scenario in which she had found her feet faster, in which she had not hit the floor so hard, in which she had anticipated his move before he slammed into her and knocked her down. *You should have defended her. You should have protected her.* The sense of shirked duty filled her belly, and she shoveled the rest of the cake on top of it, resisting the guilt and its painful hold on her.

Once she had emptied her bowl (and, admittedly, stared at its bottom for awhile, wondering if she would be sick if she got herself another slice), she picked up the telephone and dialed for Barb and Lois's shared home. Lois answered, breathless. "Maple Crest 8-9544," she panted into the receiver.

Lana's eyebrows quirked in the middle. "It's Lana. Is this a bad time?"

Barb interrupted, somewhere beyond, "Who is it?" and Lois answered, "Lana," and then she cleared her throat. "No, no—it's fine! We're just finishing packing for our trip—it got postponed, so we're leaving tomorrow—"

"Packing?" Barb cackled in the background. Lois cut off, sighing heavily, and Lana rolled her eyes skyward. *Please, Barb, for once—I don't want to hear about your sex life.* "You're a terrible liar, honey." Then, into the receiver, she yelled, "I was fucking her brains out!" *Oh, for the love of god.*

"Would you knock it off?" Lois reclaimed the telephone. "Ignore her. We're really sorry we missed your birthday. We were going to come by again, but then since we'd already had the party and everything—and I know you just had surgery—and Barb wanted to go to Pat Joe's, and I knew you wouldn't be interested in that. What happened? Was it okay without us?"

"No, no, Lois, it's fine." Secretly, Lana celebrated Lois's forethought in keeping her away from the gay bar. She had no intentions of dragging back there to get wasted and wake up beside a stranger. Her body ached at the mere thought. "We napped almost all day, and then we ordered a pizza and went to the movies. Sister Mary Eunice baked a cake. It was very peaceful." *Until Mary Eunice panicked in the car. Until the dog made us think something was going to eat us.* "Anyway, that's not why I called—"

Barb cut in again. "What did she do for her birthday?" and Lois repeated almost what Lana said exactly. Then Barb asked, "So what about that newspaper article? Is everything okay on their end? It looked pretty bad. I don't want the press to get bad for her again."

*It would have been faster to drive to the library and loan a book on hair health,* Lana griped internally. She pinched her fingers on the bridge of her nose to relieve the pressure of the headache budding there. "It's fine—sort of." *That man might not have recognized you if it weren't for the newspaper article.* "Walter has it under control." The lie stung her eyes, but she couldn't burden her friends with the truth. "Everything's fine. I just need some hair advice."

"Ooo!" Lois squealed aloud at the question. "Hair advice! I'm your girl. What do you need? A new conditioner? A new shampoo? A new color? Oh, Lana, you would look so good as a blonde…" She hummed, dreamy, still floating somewhere in the haze of post-orgasm which Lana recognized well. "I could curl it and make you look like Marilyn Monroe. You know it's always been my dream to dress up a pretty girl to look like Marilyn Monroe."

"No—it's not for me. But thanks, er, I'll keep it in mind." *Definitely not.* Lana cleared her throat. "No, um, Sister Mary Eunice got her hair pulled pretty badly. Her scalp's all swollen, and it's starting to bruise. It's hurting her. What can we do?"

Barb asked Lois what was going, and Lois repeated Lana's tribulation. Lana braced herself for the
inevitable sex joke, which arrived as planned. "Christ, Lana, I know there's rough sex, but lay off. You can't be pulling your girl's hair out. Lois would murder me if I touched her hair—even in the heat of the moment." Murder? I doubt it. The word branded the roof of her mouth and stilled her tongue. But as Barb laughed off her own bad joke, she pressed, "Seriously, though, what happened?"

_I could have been home with a library book by now._ "We tried to go out for lunch. The waiter recognized me and thought we were together. The manager knocked us around a little bit before we were able to leave." Her voice shivered even with all of her effort to stuff it down and keep it steady. She licked her lips to wet them before she said, "It—it really wasn't a big deal. I wish it had been me instead of her. I knew what I was getting into when I went public with this."

If you start crying again, a harsh inner voice threatened; it didn't finish its sentence as she dabbed the corners of her eyes. "She tried to stick up for me when he hit me, and by the time I got up off the floor, he had her by the hair, pinned to the table, grinding up against her like he would've torn everything off of her if there weren't people watching. She didn't deserve that. It was meant for me." The hair on the back of her neck stood up. Blue eyes carved patterns into her back, and Lana realized too late Mary Eunice could hear her side of the conversation.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Lana, you don't deserve that, either—nobody does." Barb whistled low. "Did you call the cops? I mean, they couldn't hold any sodomy charges against you. She's a nun, much to the disappointment of every man and dyke in Boston. Get a Catholic judge, and the people will riot at some bigot humping one of their sisters."

"No. We grabbed our shit and ran, like rational people."

Lois murmured, "You don't deserve to be treated this way. Neither of you. I'm glad she's willing to stick up for you. She's got impenetrable armor. Nobody can hold a flame to her—they can't decide that you're secretly banging behind closed doors and label it. And she has some variety of holy authority, at least in the eyes of some people. Barb and I can't offer you that. She probably knows that." She hummed again, this time less dreamy and more thoughtful. "She must care about you an awful lot, you know. You won't find that sort of dedication in many people."

_I know. I don't know how I earned her loyalty, but I'm so grateful for it. She's the only bright thing that has happened to me these last few months._ Lana bit her tongue to keep from divulging the truth of her heart, the burning attraction, both physical and emotional, that drove her every movement beside Mary Eunice. "But about her hair?" she pressed.

"Oh! Right." Lois coughed. "So you said her scalp's bruised and swelling?" Lana hummed her agreement. "God, he must've really grabbed onto her. Well, actually, it might be best to shave it off so you can treat it, but I would guess that's probably against her religion or something. Try to rinse it with cold water or put an ice pack on it, and keep it elevated above her heart. Make her sleep with a bunch of pillows. Treat it like a typical bruise—right, honey?" Barb gave some approval from the other end of the line. "Now, if you're worried about damage to her hair, just continue her normal routine—shampoo and conditioner, gentle brushing. You're probably going to see a bit of hair loss, but don't worry over it too much."

Barb's voice returned to the receiver. "Is Sister Mary Eunice concerned about this at all, or are you just worrying over Rapunzel losing her cherished golden locks of mystery?" Lois snatched the phone back, and they wrestled audibly, one of them wrenching it from the other, the grunts and giggles crackling to her over the line. _I could just hang up now. They wouldn't notice for a few minutes._

Lois won, either because she held the phone out of Barb's reach or because Barb relented. "Ignore her," she said, not for the first time in the conversation. "She's got the hots for your nun." _She's not_
the only one, accused the dark inner voice again. "She's got the hots for every woman in town, actually, but you already knew that." Yes, I did. "Was that all you needed?"

Beyond, in the living room, Mary Eunice sneezed aloud; a fit of coughs consumed her, dry but heaving as her lungs wheezed. "Um—actually, ask Barb for any recommendations for treating a cold."

In a singsong voice, Lois summoned, "Nurse Barbara! Lana requires your expertise!" to which Barb snapped, "Call me that one more time and I'll bite your tongue." Lois giggled, replying that she wouldn't take much issue with that. Barb cleared her throat. "Alright, sugar cakes, give me your symptoms and I'll give you the cure."

"Well, she's got a dry cough in her chest, and she's really sneezing and congested. Her throat hurts. She's kind of dizzy, and she's running a fever."

"Mm, well, in the medical world, we don't call that a cold. It's called influenza, and it does occasionally kill people. Colds don't give people fevers." A cold stone dropped into Lana's stomach, and she wiggled with discomfort in her seat. Good lord, I shouldn't have asked.

From somewhere beyond, Lois snapped, "Barb!" in an aghast voice. "What the hell? That's the last thing she needs to hear right now!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, I said occasionally kills people. The elderly and children are at-risk groups. Plus, it's a little early in the season. I'm sure it's not as bad as it could be. Did she get her flu shot this year?"

"Probably not—but I had mine."

"You know what? Kudos to you." Barb cleared her throat. "Look, she's going to be fine. She'll probably be pretty sick for a few days. Keep her hydrated and resting." Easier said than done. Lana sucked her teeth and remained silent, unwilling to delve into Mary Eunice's annoying habit of working from dawn until dusk. "Give her some decongestants and Tylenol. Keep her drinking something warm, chicken broth or tea. And do the old Vicks trick. Put some VapoRub on her feet and put socks on her. That cough will clear up in no time. She'll be alright." Barb's tone held her smile, her reassuring, level-headed personality that Lana and Wendy had befriended in college. "I can give you a hot toddy recipe, but I doubt she'd appreciate it."

Doubt it. Lana spun her chair around. "I can ask." The telephone cable caught around her arms and face; she batted it out of the way. Through the ajar door, she spotted Mary Eunice twining the needle and thread through the torn seams of the couch's arm. "Hey, Sister? Would you drink a hot toddy?"

Mary Eunice peered up at her, eyes crinkling at the edges with her genuine smile. "No, thank you. Tell her I'm fine. It's just a cold." She scratched Gus behind the ear where he had lain beside her, head in her lap. When she lifted her hands back to her project, he pawed her for more attention, and she shushed his whining.

"Well?" Barb pressed.

"She said fuck off, politely."

"I did not!" Mary Eunice protested, appalled, as Lana rolled her chair back, head tossed back in laughter. "Lana! Tell her I didn't say that!" She stabbed herself in the finger again. "Ouch." Gus crawled into her lap to lick the pricked digit with a wide swath of his fat tongue.

"It sounds like something was lost in translation," Barb chuckled. "C'mon, don't tease your nun. 
She already took a beating for you once today." Lois's voice cut in behind, faint as she scolded Barb for the blunt end of her tongue, and Barb badgered back at her. Lana sucked in a breath, trying not to let the truth of Barb's words sting her. They did anyway.

Once their quibbling had fallen back to silence, she said, "She said thanks but no thanks."

Lois reclaimed the telephone. "Say, Lana—what restaurant was it? We can't risk getting outing— and I'd rather not get groped by some fatass who can't keep his hands to himself."

"Oh—it's the new Waffle House down by the supermarket, downtown."

"Why don't you ask Walter if you can burn 'em in the paper, then?" Barb asked. "I'm sure he's chomping at the bit for you to give something willingly—other than that dumb column. No offense, but that's like the most boring thing you've ever written, and that includes your old cooking column."

Lana's lips parted in shock at the notion. Of course, you imbecile. Walter told you—you have a live mic. People will listen to anything you have to say. "Barb, you're a genius. That's exactly what I need to do. I'm a reporter—and I'm sitting on my ass like a bump on a log. I can throw their asses in the frying grease. The city will eat them alive if I tell them to." Do I want to tell them to? She shoved away the doubtful thought before it had a chance to take hold. As much as she wanted to return to her old life, she could not allow someone to roll over her and Mary Eunice like a couple of floor mats. People pay for it when they fuck with people I love. She had made that promise to Mary Eunice, and she intended to follow through with it.

Barb snickered. "Set the fire to 'em. I'll be looking forward to reading it. Look, we really do have to get to packing, because we leave tomorrow and we keep getting distracted—" Both of them began to laugh aloud. "We gotta get as much as we can of each other before we're separating, you know?"

Yeah. I know. Jealousy spiked in Lana's abdomen; she killed it with a reminder of the vengeance she needed to seek. "Right. Let me know how things go, okay? Thanks, guys." Lois began to warble something back to her, but she hung up on them. They had each other to share, and she had no one. That's a lie. Whenever Mary Eunice's gaze touched her back, the hair on the back of her neck prickled, the sensation comforting. She isn't worth less because you don't have her body. She regretted the dark thought and bit it back. "Sister?" she called as she rose from the office back into the living room.

The spoon in her empty bowl spun around, scraping in a circle; the chocolatey scent rose from the crumbs in its bottom. She set it on the end table. Mary Eunice hummed as she looked back up to Lana, pink lips curled upward at the corners. The hot flush on her cheeks had darkened. Lana stifled the urge to touch her face, feel the heat of the fever, and wrap Mary Eunice in a blanket and stuff her in the bed like a child tucking in a teddy bear. "Do you mind if I write an article about what happened to us?"

"In the restaurant?" Lana nodded in response to Mary Eunice's dazed, glassy eyes. "Write whatever you like. I'm here regardless, yours regardless." She tied off one section of the hem she had created. "Do you think it would look better with black or brown thread? This white really protrudes…"

Yours regardless. The choice of words sent Lana's belly into a series of squirms which she fought to calm, infuriated at her own insatiable attraction. "No—believe me, it's not worth the effort. It didn't cost us anything but the labor of moving it from the dump to the house." She hesitated, frowning as she looked down at Mary Eunice, not entirely convinced her friend understood the gravity of having her name mentioned in the newspaper. "Are you sure?" she queried. "You won't
mind if the Monsignor reads it? Or Father Joseph?"

"The Monsignor placed me with you, and Father Joseph will understand." Mary Eunice assured. She began to smile, but a raw sneeze ripped out of her sinuses, so Gus dove forward to lick her face again like a first-response rescuer. She wiped his saliva with her handkerchief. "I don't care what anyone sees or thinks. You're my friend. I've made my peace with what that could mean for me."

A shiver sent her flesh into goosebumps, and she plucked at the fabric of her jacket like it itched on her skin, but she didn't break from Lana's gaze. "If someone decides to hurt me because I love you the way you are, it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make." Her hand, fingernails bitten down to the quick, picked at the soft row of scabs on her left arm. "We all have sins, and I have—far more than others. I won't deny that. I will spend the rest of my life atoning for what I've done and who I've wronged." The tiny wounds opened into bloody spots. Gus licked up her faintly freckled skin to cleanse it of the fresh blood. "I've made my choice. I'm going to stand with you, regardless of what anyone else says or does."

Tears stung the backs of Lana's eyes, so she closed them, arms folding around her middle to protect herself from the onslaught of emotion; Mary Eunice's honest, fervent words delivered in a voice made hoarse by illness wreathed around her like a soft blanket, left her weak at the knees. Mary Eunice murmured her name in a question of her well-being, and she released a heavy breath, focusing on the empty feeling when it left her lungs. "You get sick, and you become a goddamn poet." Her voice betrayed the bundle of nerves she had become, trembling like an autumn leaf clinging to a branch in a breeze.

Mary Eunice stood too quickly and stumbled into Lana's arms, all dizzy and swooning. They latched onto each other. Mary Eunice laughed, throaty and low, to Lana's ear as her arms found rest around her neck. Her body exhaled feverish heat. She should be resting, not comforting your fancies.

"Thank you."

A mortified blush heated Lana's face when she realized what she had said, the double meaning of her words—and that Mary Eunice, of all people, had the nerve to call her out. "That wasn't what I—You—Your fever is—"

She clamped her lips together to keep from digging the hole deeper. Mary Eunice's eyelashes brushed her skin. It's hard to focus when you touch me like this, Lana wanted to accuse. Sometimes I forget to breathe. "I know what you meant. I'm just teasing you." Her breath held a sour sweetness, sticky with sickness. Lana didn't mind, shivering into nervous laughter with a wry shake of her head. "Since you manage to fool me so often..." Mary Eunice exhaled against Lana's cheek, and her body relaxed into the embrace.

Lana's eyelids fluttered shut, and she wished she could drink all of the extra heat out of Mary Eunice's limbs, relieve her of the jittering chills and flushed cheeks and make her comfortable again. Mary Eunice had lived her life in pain. Lana wanted to take it all away. I could hold you forever, if that's what you wanted. I would never get bored of your eyes or your smile. I would always be grateful that I wasn't alone. Her eyes misted over, swimming with things she would not release, things with which she did not dare burden Mary Eunice. I will always miss Wendy. No one can ever replace her. If I ever love anyone as much as I love her, or if anyone loves me as much as she did, it's more than I deserve. But god, if you aren't the most marvelous thing left on this damn planet.

The reverie ended when Mary Eunice scrambled away and caught a stringy sneeze in her sodden
handkerchief. Gus whined from the floor, skeletal hindquarters and tail wriggling. "I think he feels left out," Mary Eunice grunted into her handkerchief.

"I think he's ticked that you're not letting him drink all of your snot." They both snickered, Mary Eunice weak and croaky; she moved with stiffness as she settled back onto the floor to finish patching up the couch. "I'm going to call Walter." Lana watched as Mary Eunice began to stitch the torn arm of the couch again, twisting the needle between her fingers like a graceful juggler with pins. "Do you want me to get you anything?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you." Lana took their dishes and washed them and brought Mary Eunice a glass of water before she returned to the office.

She phoned the office, and Walter answered. "You've reached the Boston Globe, Walter Emmerman speaking." His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat; it had the rusty tone it always took when he smoked too many cigarettes.

"Walt," Lana greeted; for the first time in a long time, she didn't find herself straining to speak to him respectfully, but rather quaked with anticipation at the prospect of burning the man and business that had mistreated her and Mary Eunice. "I've got a story for you. Do you have time to hear it out?"

"You have a story? President Johnson would make time to hear it out. Fire away. I'm all ears."

Lana pitched him her story with her tongue flapping twice the usual speed; adrenaline sent her fingers to jittering, so she held the phone to her ear with her left hand and sketched boxes on a piece of scrap paper with her right. Her foot tapped upon the ground anxiously. "So what do you think?"

"I think your little nun has a lion's share of courage. Tell me, did she quote Jesus at the restaurant manager, too? Because that was seriously one of the best things I've ever seen."

"No, she didn't have the chance—that isn't the point." Lana cleared her throat. She wanted to spin around in her chair to relieve the nervous energy inside her, but the telephone cord immobilized her, so she sated herself by wrapping it around her finger. "I want to burn that place to the ground. I want to put that man out of a job. You told me I have a live mic. I want to use it, and I want to roast their asses until they won't ever touch a woman again."

Walter laughed, a bitter cackle, and something vile as vinegar rose in the back of Lana's throat; she fought to keep it down, to keep from spewing the nastiness back in his face. Walt was her ticket to revenge. She needed him to hand her the megaphone. "If I've learned one thing about you, Lana, it's that you can and will destroy absolutely anyone who gets on your bad side. I hope I'm not there. I've thought about putting your name on the list. May God have mercy on any man who touches one of your little dyke friends—the nun included."

"Will you run the story or not?"

"Of course I will. It's genius. Your fan-club will have a riot. I just wish we could make it a regular thing—not you and Sister Bravery being assaulted, naturally, but you offering social commentary through your unique lens. You could even ask your little darling to weigh in with you..."

Lana set her jaw. "Yes," she said, voice flat. "Our first piece will discuss your photographers ambushing us at the cemetery on Thursday. I'm sure both of us have a lot to say about that." Walter's heavy breath on the other end dissipated into silence. "I'm already giving you the column you want. Can't you make them leave me alone? They act like the world deserves to know whenever I take a shit."
"Fine—I'll try to talk to them." Lana's teeth ground against each other at his expert dodging. Walt knew how to avoid keeping his word better than anyone else she had ever met. "I'm not making any promises. Drop off your story Monday morning, will you? Sunday's paper is already full. We'll find room for it on Monday or Tuesday. I want to give it a good spot."

"Got it."

"And make it good. Spare no details. Quote the nun. Make it clear you're not just a bitchy dyke who wants her way."

"I know how to write a story," Lana griped in return.

"Take it easy, spitfire. Put away your guns. The pen is mightier than the sword." She could hear the grin in Walter's voice and stuffed away her urge to send him an envelope filled with peanut dust. "You'll get your revenge. I promise you that. It'll run in Monday's paper."

"Thank you." The line died, but Lana didn't settle until she fed paper into her typewriter and punched at the keys with her quick, dexterous fingers. Each letter that appeared on the white sheet soothed her gut; the misspelled words formed her story, spun out of a spider's silk, strong and all too emotional when she relived the scene where he seized Mary Eunice by her hair and pinned her against the table. The image fragmented in her memory—a corpse lying on a tile floor—a body sprawled on a wet lawn. Electrical noises sizzled through her brain. Both of her ears whined into high-pitched squeals.

Memories fed into memories, many of them unrelated but strung together like Christmas lights. Only some of them lit up. In others, the bulbs had died, shutting her out. She remembered a flash in Wendy's dark brown eyes, the skunk-like scent of marijuana clinging to her clothing, but then it vanished, slipping between Lana's fingers like sand. Her own voice echoed in her mind.

"Anything I do in my life, I can do because you love me."

Wendy's eyes flicked to blue, brunette hair to blonde, golden skin to pale and freckled. Lips connected, but she could not discern if she kissed the memory of Wendy or the fantasy of Mary Eunice; the chuckle didn't match either of them.

The taste of blood halted the confused spray of emotion in her scrambled brains, and she sucked in a deep breath when she realized she had bitten her tongue. She gulped the bitter, coppery flavor. The page had stopped, filled with her honest ramblings. She tore it off of the typewriter and slashed through the misspellings and misplaced commas and periods. She skimmed the rest, but in spite of all her internal musings, she had managed to pull it off without mentioning the way Mary Eunice's blue eyes had green flecks like an ocean, how her skin was the sandy, white beach upon which Lana wanted to walk, how her hair was the sunlight on the whole scene, illuminating it and Lana's heart in the same stroke of one mighty paintbrush. She's the only reason I have to believe in God.

"Come here." Lana straightened at the sudden voice, and for a moment, she thought Mary Eunice was speaking to her, but as she spun in her chair to watch, Gus darted from across the room to Mary Eunice's lap. She placed the collar around his neck and clipped the leash to it. "I want you to go potty outside for me, okay? We don't want any stains in the carpet." He wagged his tail with his ears perked. The silver on his muzzle wasn't as apparent when Mary Eunice spoke to him and his eyes lit up. They went out the front door, and Gus shot forward, dragging her out onto the porch.

The gap in the couch had vanished into a neat, thin line of white thread, and a tube of wood glue laid on the upturned coffee table, the broken leg back in its proper place. What happened to resting when she finished the couch? At Lana's thoughts, Mary Eunice yelped a short cry alongside the heavy thud of a body slapping into grass. "Sister?" Lana left the paper on her desk
and jogged after them.

Mary Eunice had landed flat on her belly in the lawn. Gus trotted away, dragging his leash behind him, to lift his leg on a couple of the shrubs. As Mary Eunice fought to right herself, Lana pushed through the screen door and went down the steps to her, kneeling beside her in the grass. She laid an arm around Mary Eunice's shoulders. At the sudden touch, Mary Eunice flinched and cried out again, this time in surprise. Her hand fluttered over her heart. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." The nude pink lips formed an O while Mary Eunice fought another fit of the heaving coughs. "Take it easy. It's okay."

She sucked at the air like a calf at a teat, but every breath rattled in her chest and sent her into another string of coughs so powerful her body quaked with them. *She's going to pass out before she can breathe.* Lana clutched her wrist and watched her whitening face and streaming eyes. Gus whimpered and dragged back over to them. "No," Lana ordered when he lunged to lick Mary Eunice's face.

The first clean gasp of air made Lana sigh with relief. She drank the air with eager gasps, settling her quivering body. "I'm okay." Her whispered words burned Lana's insides; they held the same reassuring tone Mary Eunice used when Lana awoke from a nightmare. *She's trying to keep you from worrying.* "It's okay. I'm okay."

"You're not okay." Lana pressed a hand to her cheek. Mary Eunice's eyelashes flicked closed at the touch, but she didn't lean into it. *Her fever has made her tender. Everything hurts.* "God, you're burning up. Come here, stand up—slowly." Lana held onto her, arms around her waist to steady her when she swayed with dizziness. "You're sick. You need to go in and rest."

"I'm alright." Her glassy eyes reflected the bright October sunlight, but when the breeze brought the crisp autumn leaves into their yard, she shuddered. "It's just a chill. I—I just slipped on the steps." She grappled with excuses, and Lana batted each one away like a mosquito on her arm.

"If you tell me you're fine one more time, I'm going to take you to the hospital and tell them to check your head as well as your lungs." Mary Eunice averted her eyes, lips curling downward at their corners. Her body tremored with weak shivers. The ruddy patches on her cheeks bloomed back in full color under the chilly breeze. One of her hands wandered back to the sore spot on her scalp and massaged it. "Come with me. Come on." Lana didn't release her on the way up the steps. Her arms sought the extra heat shedding from Mary Eunice's body. "Sit down." She pushed her onto the couch cushions.

"Gus is outside," Mary Eunice mumbled. She blinked, bleary and confused, but she didn't recline on the couch as Lana retreated into the kitchen. "I don't know why you're so concerned. I've been sick before. Nothing good comes of indulgence."

"You and your fucking Catholic martyrdom." Lana bit back the sharp retort. "I know where Gus is. It's not like he'll make it far." She poured a glass of orange juice. "Hopefully he'll shit while he's out there." She found the glass of water that she had brought Mary Eunice earlier, only a few sips taken from it. "Here. Drink. You're dehydrated. Your eyes are all glossy." Under Lana's sharp stare, Mary Eunice took the glass from her and sipped obediently at the juice. "It's not indulgence. You're sick. You need to rest before you hurt yourself." Mary Eunice mumbled a protest, eyes downcast, but Lana paid more attention to the string of orange juice on her upper lip until she swathed it away with her forefinger. "I'm going to get you some more Tylenol."

She headed down the hall to the bathroom, running over every cold remedy her mother had ever tried on her. *I don't have any Vicks VapoRub.* She could always boil some canned chicken noodle soup or brew some hot tea. *I'll stir some lemon juice in with her water. But then will she drank it? She told that asshole waiter she didn't want any lemon in her water.* She popped open the bottle.
of Tylenol and the decongestants she had purchased that morning. *Dammit, she's getting some cough syrup, too.*

Plucking a spare blanket and pillow out of the closet, Lana returned to her. "Does this stuff make you puke?" she asked, shaking the bottle of cough syrup.

Mary Eunice gave her a leery look, gaze sliding to the bottle with more dislike than Lana had ever seen her place anything under before. "If I say yes, do I not have to take it?" The last shreds of hope on her face disappeared when Lana unscrewed the cap to the bottle.

Lana poured it into a table spoon. "Open." Mary Eunice didn't protest more, eyes and face scrunched up tight when Lana popped the spoon into her mouth. "Good god, it smells like Satan's piss." Mary Eunice reached for the glass of water and gulped it down to follow the bitter pinch on her tongue. "Take your pills." They went into her mouth as Lana instructed, and she wrapped the heavy blanket around Mary Eunice's shoulders, tugging it taut while she shivered. "I'm going to take care of you, okay? Just like you took care of me."

A soft smile touched Mary Eunice's lips, weak and sort of sad, but she nodded in agreement. "Thank you, Lana. I don't expect anything of you."

"I know you don't." Gus scratched at the door, and Lana let him in and unhooked the leash from his collar. He dashed right to Mary Eunice's side. She had begun to massage the sore spot on her scalp again.

Lana found a bag of frozen peas in the freezer and wrapped it in a thin dishrag. "Peas?" Mary Eunice questioned, eyes wide.

At the perplexed look on her face, Lana exhaled a chuckle. "I'm not feeding you frozen peas, I promise. They're best in a can, anyway." Gus keened when Mary Eunice scratched behind his ear. "Lois told me to ice your bruise." She put on their record, the one they had danced to—as if either of them knew how to dance—and the quiet voices hummed forth. Then Lana sat down on the other end of the couch, tugging the pillow into her lap. "Is this okay?"

Mary Eunice didn't need an invitation to dive at the opportunity. She placed her head on the pillow, both big blue eyes gazing up at Lana as she rested her ear right against her abdomen. "Perfect," she breathed through her mouth. She snorted through her dripping nose.

Lana pressed the pack of peas to the top of her head. A small smile decorated her chapped lips. "I forgot how silly faces looked from this angle." Lana chuckled at the honest words. Mary Eunice's eyelids fluttered as Lana adjusted her blanket, tucked it up higher around her shoulders. "I can hear all of your tummy noises—and your heartbeat." With her eyes closed, she fell silent for a long moment. Is she asleep? Lana wondered. Then, Mary Eunice whispered, "Is it always so fast?"

"Only when I worry about you," Lana assured, but the lie made her pulse beat all the faster, and she knew Mary Eunice could hear the difference.

She didn't remark upon it. She uttered a few more heavy breaths before she said, "Gus must really love us. He sees us from the worst possible angle all day long, and he still thinks we're the best stuff on earth." She said the words like a philosophical discovery.

Lana stifled a loud laugh with the palm of her hand. "You're high on cold medicine."

"Probably." Mary Eunice fumbled with Lana's arm to place her hand on her cheek. The heat still burned furiously there. "Thank you. I don't deserve your kindness."
"You deserve every kindness," Lana reminded her. She kept her hand resting on the hot cheek until Mary Eunice uttered her first snore. You're beautiful even when you're sick as a dog. Lana inhaled deeply and leaned back into the cushions of the couch. As the exhausting morning ended, a burden lifted from her shoulders. She could only cradle Mary Eunice and wait for her to awaken, hopefully feeling better. But she could think of nowhere else she would rather be.

…

After a long afternoon nap and a dinner of leftover pizza (and more cake, for Lana, who had decided she would eat the whole damn thing by herself or get sick trying), Mary Eunice crawled into bed by nine o'clock with no complaints; her head felt all fuzzy, Lana's face the only clarity she could find in her surroundings. The walls hazed and curved. She marched directly into the door frame when Lana ushered her off to bed. She even skipped her daily devotional. I'll read it before church in the morning, she assured herself.

In the darkness of the bedroom, she pinched her eyes closed, hoping she would forget about the lack of light if she pretended it existed beyond her eyelids. Lana's movements echoed through the home. Lana is just a wall away. She'll be in bed soon. She has to take Gus outside. Mary Eunice shuddered under the blankets and tugged them up higher over her shoulders. She couldn't get warm, and her skin burned with even the most delicate of touches. Her favorite sheer nightgown left her itchy. When she slid her legs under the blankets and their hair rubbed the opposite way, it ached. Don't be silly. You're just achy and cranky from being out all night in the rain. You'll be better tomorrow. You're letting Lana coddle you.

The wind scraped the tree branches against the side of the house, and her eyes flicked open, a gasp fluttering through her parted lips. Light from the living room poured in faintly through the open door. She rolled onto her back and swallowed; her swollen throat almost refused to allow it. Relax. Crossing her arms over her chest, she rested, propped up on the pillows like Lana had instructed her. Cool sweat dampened her armpits, her palms, her thighs, but everything ached with chill.

Pressure tightened around her throat like hands. Her eyes fluttered wide at the sensation. Hazy figures floated above the bed. There's somebody in the house! Her lips refused to part and cry out. Her voice lost itself, burrowed deep inside her body, seeking refuge from her summonings, as Oliver Thredson's face shimmered into view. The lenses of his glasses glinted. "I never got to properly thank you for setting me free, Sister." He smiled at her, all things evil wrigging there at his mouth. "You heard me when no one else did. Heard my thoughts—saw what no one else could see… It's such a shame our time together was cut short."

He lit a cigarette. The smoke curled all gray and putrid in the air. From behind him, Dr. Arden emerged. "Little Sister. My ray of sunshine. You were right, you know. Every time I grab my cock, I think of you. I think of burying myself inside of you and then making you lick your own juices off of me. How arousing it was when you nibbled on my candy apple… How shameful that I did not get the opportunity to pop your little cherry."

Sister Jude ghosted by in her habit, heavy and black. "I refused to see what everyone else saw!" she yowled. She slapped a cane into the palm of her hand as she paced, Mary Eunice's eyes following her as tears budded and fell. "When they said that you were stupid!"

The Monsignor, naked and bearing an erection, crossed his arms as he gazed down upon her, disapproving and hateful. "You stole my virtue. You corrupted me. You are unworthy of anyone's mercy or love. Now I can't look at you without remembering how slick your insides are, without remembering how much you want me and acknowledging how much I want you. You make me hard, Sister."
"Don't be so hard on the girl, Monsignor," purred Thredson. He blew his cigarette smoke at her in a thick ring. His clipped narration made her chin wobbly as he leaned over her. His breath tasted like tobacco. "I know what makes you wet. I know what you saw in my head."

In the reflections of his pearly teeth, he gave way to memories through his eyes that the demon had viewed. His inner monologue narrated when he saw Lana in the day room at Briarcliff. *Providence is kind, indeed. She is right where I need her. She will be mine.* He led Lana out of the asylum while Mary Eunice listened, back turned, to their thoughts—Lana's hopeful and trusting, Thredson's filled with the images of himself thrusting into Wendy's frigid body again and again, how he had pried out her teeth and fastened them into his mask of human flesh. The demon smiled. The human girl, caged in her own mind, wept.

His memories cried out to her when Lana and Kit bound him and shut him in the closet. "You saw everything I did to her. You loved it as much as I did. You loved the sound of her crying, didn't you, Sister?" Lana lay on a tiny bed, shackled by her ankles, with the skirt of a dirty nightgown bunched up around her abdomen as Thredson ripped his way into her body and forced her to accommodate him. The pleasure of his orgasm bled into Mary Eunice's brain. "You loved how I planted my seed in her orchard. How I milked her breasts with my teeth. Of course, she didn't have any milk to offer—but I've learned the taste of a woman's blood is the same."

_No!_ All of the protests Mary Eunice desired died somewhere in the back of her throat. Her chest constricted. Her tongue plastered itself to the roof of her mouth. Chains anchored her limbs to the bed, her head to the pillows, so she could not cry out for Lana to run away. _Why can't I move? Oh, God, please, deliver me!_ Her eyelids slipped closed, pushing more tears down her pink face. "I defiled her. Isn't that the most wonderful thing? I gave her what she had never wanted, and you—you thought it was nice. You freed me so that we could work at it together. You hired me to give me the opportunity to make her my slave, my delightful, homosexual concubine to carry my seed to fruition…"

_No, it wasn't me! Please don't hurt Lana!_ Thick saliva pooled in the back of her mouth. She could not swallow. A low buzz drowned out Thredson's words, and she took the opportunity to chant a prayer in her mind. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women…* "So unfortunate that we were cut so short." _God, please, send him away._ "I could have buried myself into her warm, moist cunt again and again, and she could have done nothing to stop me. Eventually she would have learned to love it, her role as my slave, my wife, the mother of my children. She wouldn't have had a choice as long as I had you by my side—"

A hand closed around her wrist. Mary Eunice pounced upward out of her paralysis with a teary shriek of, "Leave her alone! Don't touch her! Don't—Don't—" The visions had vanished with her eruption, the room lit by lamplight, and tender arms folded around her waist and tugged her nearer. "Where did they—He was—There were—" Her voice formed a stream of mumbles.

Lana smoothed a string of hair back out of her eyes where it stuck to her sweaty face. "There's nobody here. You were dreaming." Mary Eunice whimpered, pathetic in her mewl, and Lana turned her over so she could snuggle nearer. Hiccups and coughs and sneezes and gratuitous amounts of snot accompanied her sobs. "I've got you. You're safe." Her hand pressed to Mary Eunice's sweat-slicked forehead. "Your fever's back up. Let me get you some more Tylenol. Stay."

As she attempted to free herself, another ragged scream of, "No!" ripped forth from Mary Eunice's lungs. She crawled into Lana's lap and held fast to her clothing. "Don't leave, please, he wants to hurt you!" Some tiny part of her knew she made no sense, knew Lana had killed Thredson and eliminated his offspring from inside her body, but the hallucination held fast to all of her fears and awakened them. Lana didn't fight her; she allowed Mary Eunice to fasten close to her front like a
button. "I'm so—so sorry!" she wailed. She stuffed one of her fists into her mouth to muffle her cries, but they rolled forward anyway. The sobs had formed an alliance on the front line of the battle, and their troops were much mightier than her resolve. Her drunken tongue tripped and slurred with the thickness of her sticky saliva collected in the back of her throat. "I let him go—I let him take you—I knew what he was going to do—I couldn't stop him—" She choked around her swollen, raw throat. "Why am I so weak? I'm so—stupid—"

Her stomach flipped, and she squirmed, fearful she would vomit, but Lana clutched her. The low voice murmured sweet nothings to her ear until her words quieted into a blubbering string of nonsense. "You had a bad dream," Lana reminded her, lips right at the helix of her ear. "You're sick, and your mind is all jumbled up." Mary Eunice shuddered against her. No amount of blankets or skin could warm her bones. "No one is going to hurt either of us. We're both safe." Her scalp throbbed at the bruised spot where the man had seized her, and like she read her mind, Lana found it with her fingertips and massaged gently. "You're not stupid or weak. You're very brave." She smoothed her hand over Mary Eunice's sweaty hair.

Trembling lips and tongue refused to still inside her mouth, and Mary Eunice shivered at the light brushes of Lana's hands against her sensitive skin. "I'm sorry," she repeated in a bare whisper, shaking so hard her teeth rattled. "I would do anything—anything to change it—what I did to you—to everyone—" Lana shushed her and wrapped the blanket tighter around her shoulders. "I don't deserve your forgiveness—your friendship—anything."

"Lie down," Lana encouraged. "It's okay. Lie down." She fumbled for a moment behind her before procuring the rosary from the nightstand. "Here. Hold onto this. I know it makes you feel better." She wrapped it around Mary Eunice's weakly clasping hand. "Let me get you some medicine and some water. Your eyes are all glassy again." Mary Eunice whimpered as Lana began to leave. "I'll be right back. I'm just going to the bathroom. You'll be able to see me the whole time."

She ran her thumbs over the beads of the rosary while she watched Lana's shadow dance on the wall, the door to the bathroom wide open. Pills rattled in bottles like change in a piggy bank, and Lana returned to her with pills in her hand. "We'll try aspirin instead. See if we can get you through the night." Mary Eunice put them in her mouth and gulped at the water. Her dry mouth sponged up the liquid until she drained the glass. "Good." Lana mopped up her sticky face with a cool, wet washcloth. "I'll get you some more." *I just want to feel your arms around me. You make it feel better.* But Mary Eunice didn't have the strength to put her thoughts to words, and Lana hurried off to fetch her more water.

Exhaustion tugged her eyelids down like weights, but Thredson's silhouette appeared behind them, and she snapped awake, unable to relax. The bed sank when Lana joined her. "Come here. It's not ten o'clock yet." Mary Eunice obeyed, curling into Lana's open arms; she rested her cheek on the ridge of one collarbone. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

The saliva had begun to pool in the back of her throat. She struggled to swallow it; her throat ached when she forced it to accommodate a gulp. Her voice formed a croak like a dying frog. Her wet eyelashes brushed Lana's skin. "I saw it, in his head, what he was going to do to you, before he did it—I knew what he was—what he did to Wendy and those other women—" Her speech splintered when her stomach convulsed, but her tight throat wouldn't allow any vomit to pass upward. "I didn't do anything! Why didn't I do something?"

Lana didn't answer, but she bowed her head, pressed her lips into Mary Eunice's hair. "I let him go when I heard him in the closet, all tied up." She remembered now, the smile she had given him, the words when she reassured him she knew *exactly* what he had done to wind up in there and she *didn't care*. Her thin breaths gasped into words, broken by coughs and snifflces where Lana
wiped her running nose. "I knew what he did, I saw it—he thought about it all the time, what he had done to you—"

Her psyche splintered when the scene returned to her, first through Thredson's eyes. His body sweated waves on the small woman below him, and Lana was the smallest Mary Eunice had ever seen her, face turned away but still shedding tears each time he rocked into her body. The lens shattered, and she became Lana, gazing at the gray wall and begging to die if it took her away from the basement and gave her a moment's peace. "It still hurts where he touched me," Lana had told her; she understood, viewing it, how those wounds still ached, as if they would ever stop. But her broken memories through the orange eyes of a demon who browsed through the memories of a psychopath reached to the surface, and she knew those places now, the ones where he had left his brand.

One fevered hand grazed Lana's shoulder through the light muslin nightgown where his scalpel snapped the strap of her bra. Lana hitched a breath when the hot hand wandered southward to cup her breast, the one upon which he had nursed like an infant. The nipple protruded into Mary Eunice's palm, and her thumb ran a circle around it, caressing it, before she skimmed the flesh and fabric back out to the crook of Lana's elbow where he had attempted to inject her with a drug to give her an unending sleep. Then, she found the hollow Lana's throat, the small scar she bore there when he had wanted to peel the skin off of her.

"Stop." Lana had tensed without her notice, stiff as a plank of wood. Her hand reached up and took Mary Eunice's away from her neck, wrapped around it, interlocked their fingers. "Don't do that."

Mary Eunice inclined her head just enough to press her lips to the last scar in the hollow of her throat, its ridge beneath her mouth so small and insignificant. In the chest beneath her, a heart hammered at a ribcage like a frightened horse trapped in a corral. You're scaring her. You're hurting her. She lifted her head, watery eyes moving up to Lana's. "I want to make it better." She shed more tears, somehow produced by the exhausted ducts. "I want to kiss all the places he hurt you and take the hurt away."

Lana leaned forward, her other hand cradling the underside of Mary Eunice's jaw. For a terrifying and glorifying moment, Mary Eunice thought Lana intended to kiss her, so much that her lips puckered in anticipation, but their noses collided in an Eskimo kiss, foreheads touching. Her eyes closed when she tasted Lana's steaming breath on her tongue. "I know you do." Mary Eunice squeezed her hand more tightly, all the strength in her sickened body pouring there. Her pulse thundered in her ears and in her tongue. "You don't owe me anything." Lana's thumb trailed the hard line of her jaw. "What he did to me is not your fault, nor your responsibility."

I don't want it because I think it's my fault. I want it because I love you. I want it because you deserve it. The thumb caressed her dry, chapped lips as Lana's gaze swept over them. The scrutiny made the back of her neck tingle. "You are enough, the way you are, with what you have already given. I don't want you to ever doubt it." Mary Eunice allowed her head to follow Lana's gentle tug downward until moist lips met the center of her forehead.

Her thoughts did not become eloquent words; rather, they formed the phrase she knew best when it came to Lana. "I love you." She lifted her eyes to Lana's. All of Lana's vulnerabilities were reflected in her brown eyes, cravings and longings and fears and triggers.

Mary Eunice wound her arms around Lana's body; her attempt at a mumbled thanks became more of a slur, brain drunk on medication and illness and intoxicated by Lana's temptation. "I love you, too." They held one another, intertwined, until Lana interrupted, "Come on, sunshine. Be my little spoon," and nudged her down onto the pillows. Lana molded around her back and placed an arm around her waist. "Get some sleep. Don't think of the nightmares."
How could I possibly, when you’re so close and soft? Comforted into rest, Mary Eunice allowed the day to fade away.

Chapter End Notes

If you followed me on Tumblr, please feel free to message me! I love to chat! :)
"We don't serve your kind here." Mary Eunice blinked up from the menu to look at the waiter when he delivered the line; it provoked in her a sense of deja vu. *I've been here before.* She glanced across the table to Lana, who met her gaze with shock, but Mary Eunice's chest didn't echo with surprise. *They're going to try to kick us out.* "I'll have to ask you both to leave. Your presence might disturb the other patrons." His rebuking gaze upon Lana made her stomach boil with rage. *How dare you look at her that way.* "There are children here."  

She lifted her head to the manager before he spoke, all red-faced and squishy and hateful. *He thinks we look delicious.* "You're despicable," he accused, those loathsome eyes fixed upon them and sweaty hands balling to fists. *We'll see how delicious he thinks this is.* His puffy neck veins protruded when he stood by their table. "Get out." Lana hesitated. Mary Eunice did not, a grin crawling upon her face. She strode out from behind the booth. Red, lacy lingerie clung to her frame, and black fishnet stockings left little of her legs to the imagination. "Get out!" he bellowed at Lana, spittle flying from his mouth. 

Lana came unfrozen and lurched upward and grappled for Mary Eunice's arm, ready to tug her out of the restaurant. Mary Eunice dug in her heels. "C'mon," Lana whispered. She snatched at the arm again. "Mary Eunice, c'mon!"  

Mary Eunice, however, stared at the restaurant manager. "I would watch your tone, if I were you, mister." Lana's face froze in terror at her confrontational words. Her lips formed pleas, but her voice vacated the premises, unable to form anything except a faint, garbled sound in the back of her throat. "We came here to eat lunch. We ordered ice water, no lemon, and sweet tea. Do you mind treating us with some human decency?"  

His lip curled, and he lunged at her. Meaty hands closed around her throat. She chuckled and flicked her hand. "Well, won't you look at that?" she hummed, head tilted, as his ankles jerked out from under him and he levitated above their heads by his toes. His snarl became a wail of pain. "It hurts, doesn't it? Dangling by your little toe? All that weight on one tiny joint..." Her grin spread wider, dimples deepening. "Maybe you should shed a few pounds, mister." She released him from her telekinetic strength, and he crashed back to the ground. His arm snapped, and as she approached, he blubbered, begging for mercy. 

She seized a steak knife from the plate of another customer, spinning it deftly between her fingers like a juggler with pins. "I can help you with that. We'll start with your shoulders. You know what they say about a good, tasty Boston butt, don't you? I'm sure you'll sell well." She peeled back his shirt and stuck the knife into the back of his shoulder, whittling it down into a long slab. He screamed, and with it, delight blossomed in her chest. "Maybe your people will reconsider before they try to mistreat my girlfriend again."  

His blood poured onto the tile floor and stained her hands. Its blots didn't appear on her bright red outfit. "Pig brains are also a delicacy in some places," she teased, "but I think we'll save that for last. How about some sausage and Rocky Mountain oysters?" She stepped on his chest with her
high heels and unbuckled his jeans. "I see you're not interested in looking up my skirt now, are you? But earlier, I made you so hard." She pouted down at him. He squirmed and panted and groaned, blubbering incoherently. "That's fine. People like meat best when it's tender, you know." She cut his underwear off of him and discarded them. "Look at that tiny package," she teased. "It will only feed one person. That's alright." With the tips of her fingers, she grabbed the head of his flaccid penis, handling it like a moldy piece of trash which would soil her hands. She severed it with a few heavy-handed saws of her steak knife. When the blade plunged into his testicles, he lost consciousness. "Good. Shut him up, for fuck's sake."

She righted herself with her prizes, and she smirked at Lana. "Do you want sausage and oysters?"

A face pressed into the back of her neck, muffled by her hair, and tugged her from her dream. "No, thanks," Lana mumbled. One of her arms strained around Mary Eunice, squished between the curve of her breasts so the hand rested just above her left one. "Your heart's really drummin'." She yawned, and morning breath fanned across Mary Eunice's face.

Lana's side of the bed had a heavy weight upon it. Huh? As Mary Eunice sniffled through her stuffy nose, she blinked to the window, still black with darkness outside. Did she get fat overnight? Their bodies fit in such a snug cradle, her dream vanished before she had a moment to consider it, to hate herself for it. Maybe I'm still dreaming. One of Lana's hands clawed up from under the covers and grabbed Mary Eunice by the face, fingers sticking into her eyes. "Lana!" she yelped, muffled by the palm against her lips.

"Sorry. Checking your fever. Aiming for your forehead. Missed." Lana burrowed her face into the crook of Mary Eunice's neck. Goosebumps prickled all over her, and she shivered at the sensation of her nearness. But the shudder did not go unnoticed by Lana, who perked up, awakening from her sleep-induced reverie. "Are you chilling again? You're sniffling."

"I—I'm—" The tickle in her throat flared to full flames. She choked on her words and coughed, first weak but growing in strength; with each breath she sucked in, she heaved deeper into her fit. Lana seized her around the waist and tugged her to sit up, stacked pillows behind her. Her chest rattled when she took in another breath. It fought to free itself into a burst of hot air. She doubled over to try to escape the jabbing pain in her back and chest. Her eyes watered with black blots hazing her vision when she drank clean air once more. "I'm okay." The croak to her voice gave her away.

Lana swung over her to climb out of bed, and when the unusual weight didn't vanish with her, Mary Eunice turned her head to find Gus sprawled out on Lana's side of the bed, leaving her the strip of neutral territory in the center of the bed—as if Mary Eunice minded the invasion. She sneezed and caught it in the palms of her hands. You dreamed about dismembering a living man. The dream raced through her thoughts in a few bold flashes, and her heart plunged onward in its rapid pulse. Her hands fistèd in the blankets. Breath catching in her throat, she sought a more pleasant place in her mind, and she returned to Eden by the riverside where she knew only peace.

A cool washcloth sponged at her sweat-sheened face. "Here." Lana shook a glass thermometer until the mercury lined up at 98.6, and then she popped it into Mary Eunice's mouth. Mary Eunice held it under her tongue and supported it with her fingers while Lana glanced over her shoulder to look at the clock. "Three minutes," she said. The gray morning light through the window cast strange shadows on her face, her brown eyes shimmering. "It's almost time to get ready for church. Do you feel like going?" Mary Eunice nodded. A genuine smile touched Lana's features. "Right. Church is like party time for you. Wouldn't miss it for the world." She cradled Mary Eunice's cheek in the palm of her hand. "You're really warm."

When three minutes passed, Lana slipped the thermometer from between her dry lips and rotated it to read the numbers. "You're at 102 right now." Lana's lips formed a concerned purse, but she
didn't challenge Mary Eunice's resolve to attend church, much to her relief. She handed some more aspirin to Mary Eunice with a cup of water. "We'll check it again when we're home and see if you need more." In the darkness, the silver handle of a spoon glinted, and Mary Eunice cringed as Lana poured cough syrup into it.

"Do I have to?" she croaked, eyeing the bitter liquid like a venomous snake slithering down the sidewalk. Lana raised an eyebrow at her, so she parted her lips and swallowed. Her whole body pulsed with disgust, and she shivered while she drank more water to rinse the flavor from her mouth. "I'd rather cough up my lungs," she mumbled to Lana.

Smoothing the sweat off of her forehead with the washcloth, Lana formed a smile. "Do you feel like taking a shower? The hot water might help your chills."

Mary Eunice bobbed her head, but even the simple motion sent her eyes to swimming as she floated behind them, dizzy and lightheaded. *It'll pass soon. Just a bad cold. You've been sicker than this before.* She swung her legs out of bed and struggled to her feet, balance dipping. Lana surged upward to steady her. "I'm okay," she managed. "Just a little groggy." *It's out of order. She showers while you cook breakfast. You shower after breakfast.* The hiccup in their routine didn't bother her, except that meant Lana would cook again. *You shouldn't make her cook. You always cook. What if she starts a fire? Oh, don't be so faithless. Lana's a grown woman. She can cook. It's just not always edible.*

Her body floated on another plain of existence as she stumbled through the bathroom door, struggling to keep her weight balanced across the arches of her feet. Arms glided through the air like water, heaviness dragging her downward. The empty space between her and every wall had grown in thickness. Disorientation jumbled her thoughts, all dizzy and drunken. The bright lights shimmered down into her eyes. Each wave stabbed them. She coughed and grappled for the light switch, killed the bulbs so only the gray morning light from the window illuminated the bathroom. Her feet sank into the plush rugs.

In the mirror, her reflection gazed back at her, pale and haggard with hair stringy and sweaty. The darkness gave her expression inhuman shadows; she tore her gaze away and stripped her body of its clothing. The door stood ajar, but Lana had left the bedroom, and Gus groaned and heaved himself off of the bed, trotting after her when the sound of kibbles pouring into a bowl echoed down the hallway. *Good, she's feeding him.*

Mary Eunice stole a glance back at the mirror, her sagging breasts, the rippling scar on her abdomen, the tangled tuft of hair between her legs. She had never been beautiful—Aunt Celest told her so. Her cheeks were too full, her lips too straight, face too flat, teeth so crooked that she tried to cover her smile with her hand. But she had no need for beauty. *Lana has enough for both of us.* She turned away from the mirror and entered the shower.

The steam clouded her negative thoughts. *Stupid dream.* Under the heat of the water, she toyed with images of Lana in her mind's eye to banish the residual pain of tormenting their assailant. Lana, fanning away the smoke from the fire she had created; Lana, small on a hospital bed; Lana, weeping and clutching her in front of Wendy's tomb; Lana, laughing with her head tossed back at the film, pizza grease staining her lips; Lana, tousled and sleepy-eyed and tangled up so close, Mary Eunice could smell her morning breath. *She is beautiful.* Her eyes closed in the darkness when her heart squelched inside of her, overflowing with affection for her friend.

She cleansed her hair and her body with haste; she wanted to leave plenty of hot water for Lana. Clothing herself, she brushed her teeth and hair, spinning it into a few strings with a comb so she could braid it. The loose design didn't pull her bruised scalp too badly, and she examined it several times before she deemed it *good enough* and sought some presentable clothing in the closet. *You tore your best skirt yesterday,* she berated herself. She couldn't wear pants to church, and many of
Lana's skirts were too short for her.

The scent of breakfast food wafted through the home. Mary Eunice plucked the towel tighter around herself. Without the protective steam of the bathroom, goosebumps flushed all over her arms and legs. "Sister? You okay?" Lana reentered the bedroom and stiffened when Mary Eunice swung back to look at her like a deer caught in headlights, clothed only by the threadbare towel. "Oh, sorry." She spun around, back to Mary Eunice. "Please ask God not to smite me. It was an accident."

In spite of the blush invading her cheeks, Mary Eunice ducked her head into a chuckle. "I don't think you have anything to worry about." She hesitated in front of a black pencil skirt, lip plucking between her teeth at the thought of it hugging her frame; it had the length she sought, but she didn't want to look like that in church. It was hardly appropriate. What would Lana wear? she questioned herself. Oh, for goodness' sake, she's standing right there. Ask her. "Um, er, I—I tore the skirt yesterday, and I haven't sewn it up, and—I don't exactly—I'm not certain that—"

Lana whirled back around. "No worries. I've got a funeral dress." She brushed by Mary Eunice, whose heart leapt into her throat at the contact on her bare arms, but Lana's eyes didn't graze her exposed body, fixed into the closet where she rifled through and tugged out a hideous black floor-length garment. "You'll want to wear a slip under it. It's itchy as hell." She thrust it out at Mary Eunice, who took it from her. "Sausage, eggs, and grits are in the kitchen. I didn't have any oysters." She grinned.

Mary Eunice choked, nearly gagging, and managed to cough and swallow in the same heartbeat, keeping down the bile inside her flipping stomach. "I—I don't like oysters," she croaked.

The deterring words did not fool Lana, whose brightness dimmed into concern, smile losing its luster; Mary Eunice watched it vanish back into her dimples, face smoothing over. "Not a good dream, then?" she ventured. Mary Eunice shook her head. The hair on her arms pricked when Lana glanced at them, the left one ridged with scabs where she had picked her anxiety into her skin. Her sniffles broke the silence, and with them, Lana raised her eyes back to Mary Eunice's, grazing the empty space between with the most cursory of looks. It still sent tingles down Mary Eunice's spine. Or maybe that's the fever. "Go get some breakfast. I'm going to hop in the shower."

The effort of clothing herself in the ugly dress and preparing a plate of food exhausted Mary Eunice; the floating sensation doubled back tenfold, sending hazy loops through her vision. Even with the dress's long sleeves and her pantyhose underneath, she shivered. Her stomach squeezed and ached with the scent of sausage. She passed one of the links to Gus, who had found a place under the table in the hopes she would pity his woeful brown eyes. She chopped the other piggy link up with her fork. At the stench rising from it, nausea hazed her mind; she dropped it for Gus, as well, and tried to nibble her way through the cheesy grits. Her eyes watered and strained under the light; pain pulsed through the front of her skull and wrapped around. I just need to close my eyes for a moment.

"Sister?" Lana's voice cut through her reverie, and a hand closed on her shoulder. "Are you okay?" A tongue sponged at the tips of her dangling fingers, whining, like he hoped to plead another piece of sausage from her. "Hey. Sit up. Look at me." Groggy eyes lifted from the table to squint up at Lana, showered and dressed and beautiful as ever. Her throat grumbled with a low moan as the pain in her head returned, the sensation like a knife plunging into her eyes. "You're lucky you didn't land in your food." Gus shoved his head between them and whimpered again, trying to reach Mary Eunice, but Lana shooed him away. "Did you pass out?"

I don't know. It all happened pretty fast. The wrinkle of concern had appeared between Lana's eyebrows once again, and she altered her answer. You're making a big deal out of nothing.
There's nothing wrong with you. You shouldn't worry her. "No." Her own voice echoed in her head, reverberating through her jaw bones, shaking her teeth in their sockets. "I fell asleep."

Lana's unconvinced frown held steady as she analyzed Mary Eunice's face through narrow, scrutinizing eyes. "Are you sure you're okay?" she asked, and Mary Eunice bobbed her head. The slow movement made her head spin with dizziness. "Try to eat something."

"I'm not very hungry," she mumbled, averting her gaze. Her stomach ached. It's probably because you haven't eaten, you idiot. But she couldn't bring herself to take another mouthful of the meal, a painful snake worming through her abdomen. Lana cooked for you. You're ungrateful. You should eat what's provided.

"It's not that bad," Lana coaxed, hoping to lure Mary Eunice into a few more bites. Her pale skin had a gray tinge, almost translucent. "Does your stomach hurt?" Mary Eunice hummed a vague agreement. She chewed the inside of her cheek as she picked up the plate. "Maybe church will make you feel better." Attending church always felt like a waste of time to Lana, but she knew it was important to Mary Eunice—it was pretty much the only thing listed in her job description.

As soon as Lana stood, Gus scampered back over to Mary Eunice and thrust his head into her lap. He knows she feels like shit. Lana threw out the food and washed the plates. She dried them and put them away. When she returned to Mary Eunice's side, she found her friend dragging her hand over Gus's large, blocky head with slow, thoughtless movements, eyelids drooping. But a small smile decorated her pink lips as she gazed down at the dog, and she murmured, "Puppy," to him. His skinny tail thumped.

"I'm going to lock him in the bedroom. Hopefully that will reduce the number of things he destroys. He didn't have any accidents last night—from what I've found. He might have eaten the evidence."

Mary Eunice's mouth flattened, cringing lines flexing around her lips. "You could have mentioned that before I let him lick my face." Lana chuckled and grabbed Gus by the collar to lead him back to the bedroom; Mary Eunice planted a kiss on his nose to bid him farewell before Lana took him away, shutting him away. "How did he end up in bed with us last night?"

Maybe she's waking up a little. Maybe the aspirin is kicking in. "He jumped on me about midnight. Knocked the air out of me. He was pretty demanding about the whole thing." Lana grabbed her purse, an extra handkerchief and bottled water stuffed in it, as she predicted it would come in handy. "I love your hair like that," she said, appraising Mary Eunice once more. The intricate but simple braid crisscrossed her scalp and shortened her golden hair in the spin. "I can see more of your pretty face." With the compliment, Mary Eunice discolored into a blush, ducking her head with a mumble of thanks. Shit, you embarrassed her. Way to go, Lana. "I wish you didn't look so miserable."

"I'm fine," Mary Eunice assured. A hearty sneeze followed the words, and Lana flung the handkerchief at her so she could catch the second and third sneezes. She wiped her nose with the cloth. "Thank you." Her eyes had the glassy film again. She needs to drink something. She looks ill. She folded the handkerchief, tucking it into the pocket of her dress.

Lana fitted their hands together. Mary Eunice's had a layer of sweat on the palm and exhaled unnatural heat. Self-doubt teased her heart, but Mary Eunice wove each of her fingers into the valleys of Lana's knuckles, and the soft of her belly warmed like an infatuated teenager. Oh, you're being ridiculous. Knock it off. The joining of their hands severed naturally at the front door. The public even had the power to kill friendship when one of the friends was an infamous lesbian, and Lana would not risk someone else lashing out at Mary Eunice because of her own folly. The story that had killed Wendy continued to raise its head and harm the people closest to her. Bitter,
she pinched her mouth at the corners as she locked the front door.

They drove to the church in silence; it was only a few blocks away, walking distance. Lana parked in the lot far back. A few other churchgoers mingled on their way to the church doors. The bells tolled in the tower, summoning all the attendees, and they climbed out of the car together and toward the open doors, Mary Eunice a half-step behind Lana. Her Mary Janes clicked the ground with each step, syncopating the louder sound of Lana's short heels. An elderly woman passed out pamphlets at the sanctuary entrance where a small crowd had gathered, exchanging the week's gossip about the grandkids and the spouse and the presidency. The woman approached Lana with the thick stack of pamphlets in her hand, blue eyes and yellow teeth flashing into a smile.

Lana donned an appropriate smile and extended her hand to accept the pamphlet, but the woman's expression froze just like the waiter's the day before. A cold stone sank into the pit of Lana's gut. Dear god. They're going to try to kick us out of a goddamned church. She swallowed hard and squared her body in front of Mary Eunice, prepared to shield her if the need arose. The hall's chattering gossip quieted, eyes fixing upon the budding confrontation. "Is it just me," Mary Eunice whispered to her ear, "or is everyone staring at us?"

Jaw flexing, Lana jerked her in a sharp nod, a confirmation of, Yes, they're staring, and Mary Eunice fell silent. "Excuse us," Lana finally allowed, clipped, as she bypassed the woman and began to enter the sanctuary. Mary Eunice shadowed her.

The woman leapt into their path. "Excuse me!" she snapped, lifting her head. "I don't believe you've come to the right place, Miss Winters. This is a church."

"Lana," Mary Eunice murmured, shushing her flush of aggression. She looked up at the elderly woman. "Please, miss, we've come here every Sunday for weeks now. We're here to worship—the same as everyone else." The wrinkled face drew into downward scorn, and Mary Eunice pled, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love another, as I have loved you."

The woman hesitated before she relented, but as she stepped aside, the crowd of bystanders intervened, encroaching upon them. At the surge of movement, Mary Eunice grabbed Lana by the elbow, but Lana brushed her hand off. Not here, not in front of them—don't try to protect me. This is my burden. She lifted her head to the tallest man. "No way!" he growled. He stepped into her space and leaned down into her face. "My grandchildren are here, you pervert!"

Her feet skittered a step backward. Her body collided with Mary Eunice's, and this time, when the hand found her arm, she didn't have the mind to remove it. "She isn't," Mary Eunice tried to argue, but her voice died off in a string of coughs. She's too sick to have to deal with this bullshit. She just wants to go to church!

"My quarrel isn't with you, Sister. But, with all due respect, I don't think you know what you're talking about."

Mary Eunice opened her mouth, prepared to argue, but Lana interrupted, "Enough!" The quibbling crowd followed her with their eyes. Their quarrel is with me, not with her. She won't sacrifice her church for me. "I'll leave. I don't want a fight." She glanced back at Mary Eunice. "I'll be back at 11:30."

Her glossy blue eyes widened. "Lana, no, don't." She swallowed hard, and she swayed on her feet, but she managed to keep herself upright. "Don't. You deserve to be here as much as the rest
of us." Her hand wrapped around Lana's wrist, a binding shackle of affection; Lana could not bring herself to shake her off. "I'm going with you. Anywhere that you're unwelcome is not home to me." Why is she such a damn martyr? Lana's mind accused. Why do you let her do these things for you? You've dragged her onto this path along with you. It's a mistake. "Let's go."

Lana closed her eyes to take a patient breath, measuring against her throbbing heart. She couldn't bear to meet the broken, torn expression on Mary Eunice's face as she spoke. She plucked at the fingers on her arm. "No. You belong here. It's okay. They don't want me here. It's their church."

"It's God's church," Mary Eunice insisted.

The grandfather crossed his scabby, flabby arms, littered with wrinkles; he fixed Mary Eunice beneath his stern eyes, like he admonished an unruly child. "Her kind isn't welcome in the kingdom of heaven. There's no reason to give her false hope here. Leviticus tells us it's an abomination."

A curtain of black swept through the entrance to the sanctuary. "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt." All eyes found the young priest, and Mary Eunice bowed her head in deference; Lana followed suit, her stomach sinking. Please don't let him throw us out. She didn't know how she would comfort Mary Eunice if a priest, one of her own kind, deemed her unfit to attend church. The man circled the crowd, some of them staring at their shoes, some women plucking at the straps of their purses, the men grating their jaws. "That's also a verse in Leviticus." He passed the angry grandfather and paused in front of Lana and Mary Eunice. "Colossians tells us Christ is all, and is in all. Romans reminds us that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And nowhere does it instruct us to keep the gates of our church and decide who may enter." He appraised them. Lana's face burned with shame, and she resisted the urge to hug herself and bury herself in her sweater.

"I apologize for the behavior of my congregation, Miss Winters, and Sister—what is your name?"

"Sister Mary Eunice, Father." Mary Eunice bit her lip and glanced to Lana out of the corner of her eye, but Lana didn't dare look back at her, afraid to peel her eyes off of the priest's friendly face. Distrust shivered inside her chest. "We're terribly sorry for the disturbance."

"I commend your bravery, Sister. You are a faithful friend—which is the best sort of friend for anyone to have." Mary Eunice murmured her thanks, but her eyes unfocused as her rubbery knees sent her into another, willowy sway. In spite of the priest's scrutinizing gaze, Lana took her arm to steady her. She's sick. We shouldn't be here. I should've convinced her to stay home. "Come inside, everyone," he invited, and the crowd shuffled into the sanctuary, some of them shooting baleful looks at Mary Eunice and Lana.

Lana chose the very back pew where no one else had sat so they wouldn't irritate any families. "Are you okay?" she whispered to Mary Eunice, low under the organ notes. White-faced, Mary Eunice bobbed her head, but she pinched her eyes closed and held fast to the back of the pew in front of her. Lana touched the back of her hand. "Christ almighty, you're still really hot." At her proclamation, the man in the seats in front of them whirled around and glared, and she bit her tongue, cursing her loose tongue. You just had a priest make your case for why you should be here. Don't throw it away by dropping the F-bomb in front of some kids. "Sit down. What hurts?"

"Nothing, I'm fine." Mary Eunice withdrew as she sat down, curling her arms around her chest. A shiver passed through her shoulders; Lana's instinct rose to embrace her and attempt to warm her, but she squashed it down. The hair on the back of her neck rose under all of the critical stares. She couldn't afford to touch Mary Eunice in front of them. Mary Eunice opened her eyes to slits, glazed against the bright lights, and patted the seat beside her. "I forgot my Bible," she murmured,
but she said it quietly with no alarm.

Lana reached into her purse and took out the bottled water she'd packed. "Here. Drink. You're dehydrated." Her lips formed a purse of displeasure. Why had they come here? Here, to church, where more than anywhere else, they could not comfort one another? Why did people steal everything from them, even their abilities to provide healing? "This place is crawling with Bibles. I think you're going to be fine."

Mary Eunice massaged her temples. A drip, like a leaky faucet, started from her right nostril, and she scrambled to catch it with her handkerchief. She sneezed into the cloth and wiped her nose. Then, she grappled with the bottle. Her sweat-slicked palms fought with the lid, screwing but unable to loosen it, before Lana took it back and broke the seal. "Thank you." Mary Eunice's croaking voice crafted a bare, dry whisper. *She's weak. She belongs in bed.*

They both straightened in their seats when the service began. Lana never paid much attention to the service—for the most part, the church performed unfamiliar sacraments and chants and prayers, which Lana, having grown as a Baptist, did not understand. (She thanked her lucky stars for the priest's English-speaking mercy, as Mary Eunice had informed her that mass used to take place completely in Latin. *That* would have bored her to the point of tears.) But she found her gaze moving from the liturgy to Mary Eunice more than usual, waiting for her to collapse in the pew at any moment.

During the third or fourth prayer, when everyone else lifted their heads, Mary Eunice leaned back, mouth open so she could breathe through it. Her eyes were closed; Lana suspected she was trying to block out the painful light until a soft snore emerged from her throat. *Oh no.* Lana peeked over the crowd, but everyone focused on the front of the church and the religious goings on; no one had noticed Mary Eunice's slip into unconsciousness. *Yet.* Lana swallowed hard and considered, staring at the side of her face. *Do I wake her up?* Her gut told her yes, she needed to wake the sleeping nun before someone else saw her. Mary Eunice wouldn't appreciate Lana allowing her to snooze through service. But her heart begged otherwise. *She's exhausted. She would never fall asleep in church.*

The next, louder snore rumbled forth, and Lana scanned the sanctuary once more before she took Mary Eunice by the arm and shifted her so her head slid sideways, down onto Lana's shoulder. She didn't awaken. The beads of a rosary protruded from the pocket of her dress, familiar to Lana in their hue. *I didn't realize she was still using it.* Mary Eunice carried Wendy's rosary instead of her own. *She probably grabbed the wrong one since she was so sick.* An urge arose in Lana to finger the beads, to see if she felt anything from them, but she stifled it, keeping her eyes straight forward to the front of the church; she waited for someone to look at them and challenge her. She fought to prepare a defense, but none of her words formed anything sensible. *You don't have a defense because you love her, and you can't deny it.*

When the other congregation members began to rise to take communion, Lana craned her neck to see the large goblet they drank from. *I'm not waking her up for that. She'll make the whole church sick.* She touched the palm of Mary Eunice's open hand. Like a baby, her fingers closed around Lana's out of reflex. *She's probably taken communion hundreds of times. God won't notice one absence.* The tithe plates came around, passed by a couple young children. They didn't look at Lana the way the adults did. She contributed the two dollars from her purse and passed the gold-rimmed plate onward. Mary Eunice's sickly, sour breath reeked as it flushed Lana's cheek every few seconds.

As the priest offered his final blessings and everyone bowed their head into prayer, Lana nudged Mary Eunice. "Wake up," she whispered. She rattled her by the shoulder until blue eyes flicked open, uttering a grunt of surprise. "Sh!" Lana's eyes darted around to ensure no one glanced back
at them. "Wake up," she repeated, even softer than before.

Everyone roused with the end of the prayer, and Mary Eunice blinked blearily, fumbling to her feet with a few clumsy jerks. "What—What happened?" Lana ushered her out of the side of the pew and through the hall, out into the parking lot. "You let me fall asleep?" Dismay flushed her expression. The cold breeze caught her, and she crossed her sleeved arms over her chest, shuddering with the chill. "Why?"

"You're sick and exhausted. You need to go home and rest." Mary Eunice cringed at the sunlight, and then she flinched when Lana slammed her car door. She rubbed her eyelids with her thumb and index finger, trying to massage the pain out of them. "You've got a headache," Lana provided, lowering her voice. "Your fever didn't go down, either."

"I'm fine." Mary Eunice sniffled into her handkerchief. Her eyes watered, and she dabbed at their corners. "It's just a cold. It'll get better if I ignore it."

"You're not fine. You're sick." It's like talking to a brick wall. Why does she keep saying she's alright? "It'll get better if you give your body a chance to heal itself." Lana cranked the car and pulled out of the lot onto the street. Mary Eunice opened her mouth to argue, but another coughing fit interrupted her. Its length made Lana's heart skip a beat, each forceful quivering of her breath ripping out of her lungs with a wheeze following. As she sputtered, saliva strung out of her mouth, thick and sticky; she caught it with her handkerchief and wiped the corner of her mouth. "Does your chest hurt?"

"No, I'm fine." Mary Eunice's hands quivered; Lana watched her as she stopped at a sign and then pulled through. "You shouldn't worry. It'll be gone in a day or two." She blew her nose and tucked the handkerchief into the pocket of her dress again. Her right hand plucked up the left sleeve of her dress and picked at the scabs on her arm. Lana resisted the urge to swat her hand away and kept her eyes trained on the road. That isn't what Barb said. Barb said it's the flu. "It's not like I've never been sick before."

"I'm letting Barb get in my head. That's never a good idea," Lana released a patient sigh. "I know. I'm overreacting." Her gut twisted at the admittance. It didn't feel like an overreaction. Her worry didn't dissipate where it had clotted in her gut, in spite of all of her efforts to logic her way through it. "Will you at least humor me?" she pressed, glancing sideways at her. The car rolled into the driveway with a heavy thump of the wheels.

"Lana, please," Mary Eunice implored.

The words paralleled a memory, Wendy in the passenger's seat, a chocolate milkshake between them with two straws. A movie flashed on the big screen before them where they sat in the back lot of the drive-in. "Lana, please!" Wendy laughed. She wore a froth of ice cream on her upper lip. "You're going to make me spill it!" Lana prodded her in her ticklish ribs again, and Wendy doubled over in a fit. "Knock it off!"

Lana reclaimed the milkshake, holding it out of reach. "Oh, my." She leaned in, lips grabbing at air while Wendy attempted to dodge. "You've got a mustache. Let me get it."

Wendy pushed her back by the shoulder. "There are people here!" Her urgent voice dropped to a whisper, and her dark brown eyes roamed to the cars beside them; the visible silhouettes all faced the big screen or tangled in one another. "We can't. You know I just passed my licensure test. Someone might see, and I'll be out of a job."

A pout wrigged onto Lana's lips. "No one's watching." Wendy averted her eyes from Lana's, hands piling into her lap. "The grass is making you paranoid. How much did you smoke?"
"None!" Wendy insisted, too quickly, and when Lana narrowed her eyes into a skeptical frown, she amended, "Just one joint." The faint skunk-like smell clung to her breath, riding on her every exhale. "I'm not paranoid, but I'm pretty damn hungry. Give me the milkshake."

Unrelenting, Lana tossed up her feet, pressing into the soft of Wendy's abdomen when she dove for the shake. She braced herself against the car door and sucked at her straw, one eyebrow arched in a dare, as if to say, *Come and get it.* "Or what? You'll eat me instead?"

Wendy batted at her feet, but each time she plucked one free, Lana replaced it with the other, effectively pinning her away from her milkshake. "You are incorrigible!"

"Big word for a little lady." Lana slurped loudly and then swiped her tongue over her mouth, leaving a trail of ice cream around her lips. "Mm. Delicious." She held it out and shook it at Wendy, beckoning a dog with a bone. "Come on, buttercup. You know what I want. I'll bargain for it with ice cream if I must." Wendy dug her thumb into the arch of Lana's foot and rubbed, but she glared a baleful look at Lana, hoping the massage would win her over. It didn't. "Or I can drink all of our shared milkshake."

With a sigh of resignation, Wendy pushed Lana's feet out of her lap and sidled up beside her, smelling like her crisp perfume; her body flushed against Lana's, all soft and squishy, as her hickory colored eyes battled with ambivalence. "You're trying to sabotage my career," she uttered; a darkness crossed her face, a shadow of fear, and regret stirred in Lana's belly. "Your career is trying to sabotage my sex drive."

The teasing words made the light return to Wendy's face. "Well, we can't have that, can we?" Her lips pressed against Lana's, and Lana gathered Wendy's upper lip and cleansed it of the flavored mustache. Stars flashed behind her eyes. Their noses bumped in a gentle eskimo kiss. Wendy severed first. "God forbid anything should threaten your libido." Wendy twisted around one of the straws and sucked up another swallow of milkshake.

"Lana?" Mary Eunice interrupted her reverie of memories with the quiet word. "Are you okay?" She sniffled and wiped her nose with her handkerchief.

Lana bounced into awareness as Wendy's face blurred into Mary Eunice's like some twisted version of evolution, one creature becoming another before her very eyes. "Yeah," she answered. *You don't remember enough.* Guilt pierced her innards. How many times had she baited Wendy into loving her where she was uncomfortable? She couldn't remember. She had never thought ill of it, then. *I always thought she would pick me, in the end. I was wrong.* "I'm fine," she confirmed in a mumble, an afterthought tainted by her brief foray into the past. "Come on. Let's go inside."

As the mid-October wind quivered upon them, Mary Eunice began to sneeze. A few white flakes danced in the air; they landed in Mary Eunice's braid and melted, a white crown becoming a curse. Lana dusted off the front of her ugly, black dress with one absent hand as she shuddered in the chill. She unlocked the door. The dog barked from the bedroom, low and gravelly, and Lana sighed, shedding her coat. "Let's see what he managed to destroy."

Upon opening the door, Gus bound to them, leaping onto his skinny hind legs to greet them with joy. His flabby tongue lolled out of his mouth, and he paddled at them. White feathers stuck to his paws and scarred face. "Dear god," Lana breathed at the mess, the torn innards of one of their pillows spread across the shag carpet. A couple wet spots dotted the floor, but he hadn't taken a shit in the floor yet, which seemed a tiny victory compared to the mountain of destruction he had created in their absence.
Stray shreds of flimsy paper crafted a trail to Mary Eunice's Bible, the front cover ripped off of it and torn pages strewn into a heaping mess of holy confetti. She crouched to pick up. Her hand wrapped around the remnants of the cover. At her touch, the spine lost its final ties to the pages, and they all spilled out into the floor in an avalanche of lost faith and holiness. The pages jumbled out of order like pieces of a puzzle, scrambled beyond repair. No, no way. "Sister, I am—I am so sorry." You're the one who shut him back here. He ate her Bible. She has almost nothing, and you let your stupid dog eat her Bible. Lana crossed her arms over her chest.

Gus, frustrated with Lana's lack of attention to his antics, bolted away from her and dove at Mary Eunice instead. With a solid headbutt to her gut, she fell back onto her rump, grunting, "Oof!" as all the breath rushed out of her lungs, and granted access to her face, he slathered her in his affection and excitement at her arrival. She wheezed and coughed from somewhere deep in her chest. The fit worked from her body, hot, leaving her trembling and weak. Her head lolled forward when she doubled over. As her hands stilled on Gus's ears, he whined and scratched her arm.

Lana seized him by the collar and shooed him away as she knelt beside her. Her heart leapt into a panicked flurry in her chest. She took Mary Eunice by the shoulder. "Breathe," she urged. The spooked floundering of her heart sent an irrational helplessness surging through her veins. "Breathe," she repeated. Mary Eunice gasped and heaved, face whitening. Her lips had a bluish tinge. "Mary Eunice?" Lana tried to shove the wobble out of her voice. Her chin wouldn't stop shaking, betraying her fear.

A clean gulp of air freed her from the coughing fit's clutching talons. Her body sagged with relief, boneless, and Lana scrambled to support her, arms wrapping around her. She panted through her mouth. A string of snot hung from her nose; Lana dabbed it away with the handkerchief, which protruded from the pocket of Mary Eunice's dress. The sweet scent of Mary Eunice, like the wind and rain, had vanished, replaced by the sour reek of illness. "'M okay." The slurred words emerged in a mumble. "Gimme a second."

Lana wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. The skin burned at her touch. "You're hot as a coal." Mary Eunice shivered at her tender touch. Her chest's rise-fall rhythm pulsed far too quickly as she fought to catch her breath. "Let's find you some comfier clothes and put you to bed." Lips began to form a protest, but Lana shushed her with, "Don't you dare tell me you're okay." Mary Eunice obediently fell silent. Lana unzipped the back of her ugly dress. "Hold onto me."

They stood, Mary Eunice swaying; she closed her eyes, and her grip on Lana's arms tightened. She's dizzy. Lana gulped as the dress slipped off of Mary Eunice's shoulders. Once her blue eyes opened again, Lana plucked the sleeves off of her and exchanged it for a T-shirt. Mary Eunice wriggled out of her pantyhose, revealing long, white legs with peach fuzz from her ankles to the place where her thighs vanished into the hem of her underwear. Stop staring. You're disgusting. She's sick, and you're too busy checking out her goddamn legs to give her some pants. Lana gulped the bitterness out of her throat and tossed a pair of sweatpants out of the closet, hoping they would keep her comfortable and warm. She picked up the discarded dress and tossed it into the hamper. Mary Eunice slithered into the new clothing.

The destroyed pages of her Bible crinkled underfoot; white pillow feathers clung to their feet and blew around in the air. Lana bent down to collect the sheets—the ones Gus hadn't reduced to
shreds—and tucked them into the ruined cover. "I'm sorry," she said again.

Mary Eunice lifted her gaze, unfocused and dazed. "It's fine," she replied after a pause. She shuffled her feet as she took the bundle from Lana; she cradled it like an infant, letting not a page drift away from her. "It's the most printed book of all time. This one isn't special." She turned away, tiptoeing back through the door frame, up the hall.

"Where are you going?" Lana trotted after, but Gus shot between her legs, throwing her into the wall. *Goddammit, if the world isn't out to get me today.* "You need to lie down. You were just coughing up your lungs."

"I have to bury it."

"Bury it?" Lana repeated, eyebrows quirking together. *Can't you just throw it away?* She knew better than to ask the question; no nun would throw her Bible into the trash with all of their banana peels and bread ties. Mary Eunice cherished her holy book, read it almost every night before bed, prayed and meditated upon its words, and while Lana would never understand her dedication to the fantasy, she respected Mary Eunice enough to hold her tongue.

"It's the most respectful way to dispose of it, other than cremation." A feeble smile adorned her white face. "I doubt your neighbors would like it very much if I burned a Bible in your backyard. It might attract unwelcome attention."

As Mary Eunice began to slide on her shoes, Lana grappled for a respectful way to address the problem. "No, they wouldn't—but, no, you can't go out there. You're already sick, and it's freezing out. The ground's frozen. You need to lie down before you catch pneumonia or something." Mary Eunice folded the holy manuscript closer to her chest, conflict shivering onto her face, and Lana persisted, "At least let me do it."

"You can't." The objection sent Lana into a shocked silence. "It was blessed by the Monsignor. Blessed objects must be disposed of with reverent prayer and meditation—giving it back to God and thanking Him for its years of use. It would be indecent for a nonbeliever to get rid of it." Gus's toenails clicked on the tile of the kitchen behind her while Lana mulled over the words, but Mary Eunice's expression shifted from explanation to confusion, eyes focused over Lana's shoulder.

"What does he have? In his mouth?"

She whirled around where Gus had emerged, the crucifix of a rosary dangling from his jowls. "Shit. No, Gus, no! Spit it out!" Lana scrambled at him and seized it by Jesus's body; Gus squatted down to tug against her. "Bad dog! Bad dog!" She swatted him on the nose, and he jerked back, breaking the string. Lana came away with the figure of Jesus in her palm while Gus gulped and cowered, his tail tucked between his legs.

Mary Eunice abandoned the stack of pages. "Don't, don't. You're scaring him." She knelt down on the floor and summoned him with a few pats to her lap. He cowered down and skulked toward her, not meeting her eyes, dragging along on his belly. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and Lana shuffled nearer. *Just please don't start coughing again.* "It's okay. Good boy." He bowed into her hand and licked her palm. "Good. We won't hurt you. Open up."

She slipped her thumbs into the back of his mouth and parted his jaws, and his pink tongue lolled around inside. She pined it out of the way with one expert forefinger. "Don't lick me—let me see." His head tilted all the way back, exposed to the light. "I think it's gone. I think he swallowed it." She lifted her head to Lana and squinted, like she saw through a haze and fought for focus. "Is he going to be okay?" Gus licked around his mouth when she released him.

"I don't know—I guess? It should just go right through him, I think—I'm no scientist." Wendy
was, she cursed inwardly. *Wendy would have known.* "He goes to the veterinarian tomorrow, so I'll ask." Lana fingered the crucifix the dog had left her, warmed it in her palm and then unballed her hand and traced the miniature statue of Jesus again. Gus, tail all wags and mouth dribbling excitement, trotted back to Lana and whined. She glared down at him as Mary Eunice lurched back to her feet. "My daddy would've said he has the devil in him."

Mary Eunice stiffened like Lana had bitten her. "Don't say that." When Lana reconsidered her words, she winced, mumbling an apology. *Way to be sensitive. You're really a charmer, aren't you?* But Mary Eunice said nothing else; she put on her other shoe and laced it up. Her clumsy fingers tripped over themselves, fumbling with the strings as she formed a knot. She sneezed into the sticky handkerchief.

"Can I at least dig the hole for you?" Lana took her coat off of the rack and slipped into it. She handed Mary Eunice's to her when she stood, unsteady on her legs. The long snort through her nose told of the mucus and phlegm caught in her sinuses.

A strange thing, a mingled smile and grimace, pressed upon her pink lips. "No." Lana squashed a knit cap onto her head over her braid, tucking it over her ears; Mary Eunice caught her hand and pulled it away. She held it fast. "I know you want to take care of me, and I'm grateful. Your friendship is the best blessing I have ever been granted." Her blue eyes swept over their caught fingers, the mountains formed by their knuckles, before she lifted them back to Lana's, all earnest and soft. "But this is something I have to do myself. It's my responsibility."

Lana bit her tongue. *Doesn't God know you're ill? Wouldn't He rather you rest and heal than exert yourself?* Conflict warred within her, one half wanting to respect Mary Eunice and her dedication to her faith, the other urging her to bundle the woman up in as many blankets as she could manage and tie her to the bed until she recovered. "This is the first time in my life that someone's told me I'm not good enough to dig a hole in my own yard." Perhaps the guilting words would sway her from her stagnant position.

"I didn't say you weren't good enough. I said you're not Catholic enough. There's a difference."

*You're not going to win.* Lana feuded against Mary Eunice's faith, which had kept her strong through the worst times of her life; she stood no chance. *Try a different angle.* Her years of journalism had taught her many approaches to people. "So, supposing I prayed with you, and you taught me how to do it properly—with due respect, and all that—could I do it, then?"

A glimmer passed over Mary Eunice's face, flickering in her eyes like a blue flame as they narrowed in disbelief. "You would do that for me?" Her searching gaze roamed Lana's face; her skin tingled with warmth beneath it.

"Of course I would."

Their gazes locked. Electricity crackled in the air, sizzled in the gap between their faces, the air between their lips. *If she were anyone else, I would kiss her. If she were anyone else...* Lana closed her eyes and distanced herself. *Wendy would be ashamed of me.* For fifteen years, neither of them had left the other; they had never cheated but had instead relied upon one another for survival. And yet here she stood, in front of another woman so soon after Wendy died by her hand, spiraling into a new depth of unrequited affection at an unprecedented rate.

Mary Eunice folded the tattered Bible to her chest, withdrawing her hand. "I'm honored, Lana, truly, but this is for me to do." She hesitated. Ambivalence flickered upon her mouth as she considered her words. Lana waited for her to summon them. "If you want to pray with me, genuinely, and not just because you're worried about me, I would be more than happy, but—frankly, knowing you, I suspect that's not the case."
Lana snorted and inclined her eyebrows. "I can't say I didn't try."

They went outside into the flurries of snow with Gus galloping along after them. Each chilly breeze made Mary Eunice tremble. She chose a place beneath the dead tree in the backyard and forked the shovel into the frozen earth. Lana flanked her, silent and observant. Gus roamed around within their sight. The dirt came up in large chunks; Mary Eunice grunted with effort each time she punctured it and heaved up the mingled grass, roots, and worms.

Lana didn't dare make a sound as she watched; she wouldn't risk interrupting or desecrating the ceremony. But when Mary Eunice's breath rattled aloud in her chest, Lana shuffled nearer, caught her around the waist when she swayed. Their steamed breaths mingled in the frigid air. "I—I'm —" The words choked into another fit of coughs.

Solid weight dropped between Lana's arms, and she fought to hold Mary Eunice upright as the illness stole all the strength from her knees. *I shouldn't have let her do this.* The rough hacks drained her face of all pallor, eyes streaming; the temperature made Lana's nose drip, but Mary Eunice's gushed snot and blood. She folded in the middle and gasped. Her legs lost the last of their resolve, and she crumpled to her knees in the frozen grass. Lana sank beside her. "Is she going to vomit?" Mary Eunice's hands flew to her mouth when she heaved.

As they fluttered away, deep red fluid stained her palms. *Holy shit.* Mary Eunice attempted to close them, to hide the blood from Lana, but Lana caught her by the wrist. "That's enough. We need to go back inside." Lana wiped her own nose with the back of her hand.

"I'm okay," Mary Eunice muttered in a croak. She placed the Bible in the hole she had dug, and then she scraped the soil back over it. Lana prepared to grab her and drag her back inside the moment the last page vanished, but when Mary Eunice bowed her head in a final prayer, she wrangled with her patience.

She made the Sign of the Cross, and Lana wreathed her in an embrace, so forceful that breath lurched out of Mary Eunice's lungs. She leaned her head against Lana's shoulder. "I'm okay," she repeated. Her hoarse words were almost incoherent. Lana hauled her back up to her feet. *She's limp as a ragdoll.* Mary Eunice lolled in her arms while she fought for her balance. "Don't worry, I—" She coughed, this time only twice, but they silenced her into a shudder.

"Let's go inside," Lana murmured. She relinquished her grip on Mary Eunice once she stood on her own, and then she whistled for Gus. "You're going to lie down and rest." Mary Eunice didn't protest; she bobbed her head in agreement. "I'll make you some chicken soup."

"I'm fine—I'm not hungry."

The dog darted back into the house, and Lana ushered Mary Eunice inside and peeled the layers off of her like an onion. Underneath, her trembles grew more punctuated. "Just humor me, please?" Lana lifted her eyes to Mary Eunice's where the glossy orbs strained to focus. Then, her head nodded again, conceding defeat. Her willpower had dissolves. "My sunshine." In spite of everything, her weakness and her illness and the deplorable morning they had faced at church, a smile wormed its way upon Mary Eunice's lips; the term of endearment never failed to please her. Lana bounced onto her tiptoes and placed a flush kiss upon her forehead. The heat of the fever burned her lips. "Sit down. It's the day of rest and all that."

By the time Lana returned with a heavy blanket, Mary Eunice had curled on the couch, shivering beneath the throw, eyes closed and face drawn. Lana laid the blanket across her shoulders. She didn't move beneath it. Lana smoothed a hand over her burning face until Mary Eunice shifted, uttering a quiet hum of question. Her eyes didn't open. "Shush, it's just me. I'll be right here.
Holler if you need anything, okay?” Mary Eunice hummed again. "Good." Lana gazed down at her flushed, pink face. I hope I'm doing the right thing.
Swimming through the fog of her own mind, Mary Eunice followed Lana into the veterinarian's office, buried into her coat. A fresh handkerchief weighed down her pocket. Her nose dribbled from the October weather. Lana clutched Gus's leash and whistled for him to come with them; he lifted his leg on the shrubs in front of the clinic before he trotted alongside her. Mary Eunice sniffled around her runny nose, hands quaking as she caught the front door. *Don't stand there like a bump on a log. It's bad enough you've let Lana coddle you. You're not that sick. "Do you want me to take him?"

Lana's pretty brown eyes floated into view through the muddling gray. They arranged the puzzle of her face into its full picture, red lips pursed in concern. The dreary, gray day had deposited a few stray snowflakes into her brunette hair. They melted in the warmth of the building, glowed in the yellow light and vanished. "I don't want him to knock you down."

"I'll be okay." Mary Eunice gulped a lump of phlegm down her raw throat. She licked her flaky, chapped lips and folded Gus's leather leash into her hand. The tell-tale tickle in her nose arose again, and she scrambled for her handkerchief before the sneeze erupted out of her. The impact sent throb of pain behind her eyes. *This, too, shall pass,* she reminded herself. There was no point in lingering in the misery. Gus butted against her legs and took a seat, his pink tongue lolling out of his mouth. His rapid tail quieted and tucked beneath him. "It's okay, boy." Mary Eunice scratched him behind the ears. "Good boy."

A secretary stood behind the counter. "Bless you!" she chimed, bright-eyed and delightful. She had spread makeup on her face more generously than Mary Eunice would've buttered a slice of toast. *Lana's makeup is much more tasteful than that.* The moment the thought coursed through her mind, Mary Eunice scolded herself. *Don't be so judgmental. She looks very nice.* "How can I help you ladies this morning?"

"We have an appointment with Dr. Cotter."

"Alright. What's the name?"

"Winters."

The secretary peeked at them through her horn-rimmed glasses, eyes flicking from one woman to the other, and Mary Eunice shuffled her weight from one foot to the other. She tugged the leash taut in her hand and pushed her tongue into the roof of her mouth. She perceived *the look* now, the one that meant someone had recognized Lana. But, to her surprise, the woman didn't leap at them. Instead, she smiled. She had a gap between her front teeth. "Great. And we're seeing Gus today?" Lana nodded. "Alright. Let's have him get on the scale, and once I've got a weight on him, I'll get the doc."

Mary Eunice clicked her tongue, and Gus heaved back to his paws and clambered onto the scale. The needle moved and hovered around the 70. He licked his chops, gooey eyes moving up to Lana, and a quiet whine emerged from his chest. Lana scratched his ears. The secretary wrote it
down. "If you can lift him up on the table in the examination room?" Again, Lana nodded, and the woman flashed her a winning smile in return. "Great. I'll get the doc."

Lana entered the examination room, a shiny table in its center. Gus lumbered after her and stopped at her feet. They stooped over, Mary Eunice looping her arms around his hind quarters. Large black blots danced in her vision when she squatted down. *Don't be silly. You're fine. You're just a baby.* They heaved upward, splitting his weight between them. Gus's back paws scrabbled onto the slick table. The black blots swelled and consumed her full line of sight. *Oh no.* Dimly, the sensation of falling rushed past her.

Her body fell into Lana's arms, mere inches off the ground. "I knew this was a bad idea," Lana grunted; Mary Eunice's ears shrilled. "Can you hear me?" *Yes.* Mary Eunice blinked a few times as the picture eased back into focus. Lana hovered over her, hands cradling her head. "What happened?"

"M okay," Mary Eunice assured. Nervousness quelled in her chest. "'M just dizzy." Her stomach lurch; breakfast hadn't gone down easily, and now it threatened to make a reappearance. She breathed through her mouth. "Help me up?" *Don't want the vet to see me lying in the floor. I'm not the patient.* A familiar itch rose in her throat. *Not again.* She grappled for Lana's hands and tugged herself upward into a sitting position. The world whirled around and around like someone had planted her on a merry-go-round with a souped up motor.

A frigid hand stuck to the side of her face, a new habit Lana had developed. She flinched away from the cold fingers. "You're still feverish." Her body burned with tenderness. *I'm fine. It's not an excuse to laze about and do nothing.* "Can you stand?"

Mary Eunice leaned her head back against Lana's chest. *Don't let her worry. There's nothing to worry about.* She forced a smile to her lips. "No. You'll have to carry me out of here. My knight in shining armor." Nervous anticipation swelled between her lungs at the daring address. *Don't be stupid. She knows you're joking.*

At the thought, Lana chuckled, shaking her head. "You're ridiculous." Her arms wrapped around Mary Eunice's waist, providing comfort as well as support. Though her nose had clogged up beyond smelling anything, she swore she could taste Lana's perfume on the air. "Here. I've got you." She closed her eyes as she made her way back to her feet. The vertigo floated somewhere behind her eyes and made her grapple for her senses. *Careful,* Lana cautioned.

"I'm o-okay—" She choked on the words when the itch in her throat blossomed, and she coughed once, twice, thrice. *Breathe. Breathe.* Each time she tried, the air rattled around inside of her, wind through a broken window pane. Lana's hand flushed up and down her back, irritating her tender skin; how had it become that even Lana's touch, her only salvation, caused her pain? Her skin stung where Lana pushed against it, trying to bring her comfort. A cracking wheeze fluttered through her lips, but she managed to keep it stuffed down in her chest; it didn't erupt from her mouth like the others. "I'm okay," she repeated in a croak. Her voice pained her raw, metallic-flavored throat; when she gulped the excess saliva, the swollen lump pushed back against her, threatening to impede her ability to swallow.

Lana's dark eyes regarded her, narrow and critical, but before she could scold Mary Eunice or offer a skeptical reply, Dr. Cotter entered the room. "I hope all that coughing wasn't the dog." Gus wagged his tail at the greeting, head low with nervousness. He perked his ears when the gloved hand smoothed over the top of his blocky head. "Hey, pupper. Looks like someone hasn't been feeding you. You're a real big boy, aren't you?" The veterinarian glanced over Gus's thin body. "Good morning, ladies. Whichever one of you is sick—" His gaze fixed on Mary Eunice, suspecting her, and she fidgeted at his attention—"please don't breathe on me."
Dr. Cotter was a young man with short, brown hair and friendly eyes. Lana cleared her throat. "We found him Friday night, in the storm. We took him to animal control, but they couldn't take him."

"Not surprising," Dr. Cotter popped Gus's mouth open and peeked inside of it. "He's a senior—I'd put him about nine years old. Surprising he made it along this far. And he's about thirty pounds underweight. It's hard to tell what breed he is, being so thin." Gus's tongue flicked out, narrowly missing the vet's face. "He's gotta be some American Staffordshire mix, with the head, but emphasis on the mix. He's too tall and big-boned to be purebred. Maybe he's got some mastiff or rottweiler spun in there." He uncapped a syringe between his teeth.

Lana blanched visibly when she spied the needle; her hand flew to Mary Eunice's arm and latched, fingers wrapping around her wrist. It vanished into Gus's skin. He didn't so much as flinch, but Lana's fingers threatened to leave bruises on Mary Eunice's forearm. She didn't dare complain. The vet took another shot and injected it, paying no heed to Lana's distress. "Have you had any problems with him? He seems pretty well-behaved."

"Er—" Lana's voice choked in her throat. The shadow inside her eyes held fast, refusing to flee even when she managed a response. She kept her tone steady. "He—He's fairly destructive. He tore into the sofa and demolished two pillows. And he ate a rosary."

"A rosary? That's a first, I'll admit." Dr. Cotter shook up a bottle and drew up a thick, yellow liquid into another syringe. This one had no needle; he squirted it into Gus's mouth. "He should be fine. It ought to pass right through. Give him a spoonful of castor oil between meals, and call if he shows any discomfort." He scratched Gus behind the ears. A bit of yellow-stained drool trickled out from between his lips. "I've brought him up to date on his vaccinations and dewormed him. Now, what's going on with this one paw?"

"He came with a gash in his paw. He was limping when we found him, but once we got it cleaned and bandaged, he started getting around better. We've been cleaning it and changing the bandage twice a day."

Dr. Cotter snorted and inclined his eyebrows. "Sounds like you two are on the way to becoming vets yourselves." Lana and Mary Eunice exchanged a glance, uncertain how to respond, as he unrolled the bandage and discarded it to examine the gashed paw. "This is healing nicely. It's too late for me to stitch it. Keep doing what you're doing, and if it starts looking worse, I'll give you some antibiotics for him." Mary Eunice sniffled and sneezed into her handkerchief. "Bless you." She thanked him in a mumble. "What are you feeding him, and how often?"

"Iams, twice a day—and whatever table scraps he finds appealing."

"That's alright. All things in moderation. Be careful not to give him anything toxic. No chocolate, no alcohol, no garlic or onions, no grapes or raisins. And make sure he gets regular exercise. This type of dog should be fairly muscular. It's unlikely he'll gain it all back, with his age, but he should be bulky, not flabby." Gus's tail wagged when Lana smoothed her hand over his hilly back, climbing the rocks of his vertebrae and falling into the valleys between them. "Are you looking to have him altered?"

What? The question didn't make any sense to Mary Eunice, as she shuffled back through the fog of her own mind; the vacuum of weariness had drawn her attention away. "What are the risks for a dog his age? Is it safe?"

The veterinarian shrugged, nonchalant, and Mary Eunice narrowed her eyes at the way he dismissed Lana's concerns. That's not very nice. This is our dog. We don't want anything bad to happen to him. Her childish complaints echoed in the cave of her psyche, bouncing on the walls,
unable to escape. "He'll have to gain some weight, and I'll give him a blood panel before I put him under. Make sure all of his counts are up. Right now, he's anemic—his gums are white. That's just from malnutrition." His brown eyes found Mary Eunice's, and he flashed a coy smile. Don't look at me like that. You're not Lana. Like he read her mind, his smile abated, and he returned his attention to Lana; she watched the transgression between them, a grin spreading across her lips. The vet cleared his throat. "But the benefits of sterilizing a geriatric dog are the same as for a younger one. It eliminates the possibility of testicular cancer and reduces the risk of prostate disease. He won't want to run off to chase girls, he'll be less likely to mark his territory, and he'll be less likely to manifest aggressive behavior."

The sweet flavor of Lana's voice, punctuated by her slight lisp, filled the air as she addressed him in return, but Mary Eunice couldn't make out the words. Gray hazed around the edges of her vision. A high-pitched squealing rang in both of her ears. She clutched the edge of the metal table to keep her balance. Don't be so pathetic, she cursed herself. Wake up. The airy, lightheaded feeling didn't abate, no matter how she rebelled against it. Lana's hand touched the back of hers where her knuckles had whitened with the effort of staying upright. Don't you dare faint in front of that man.

Dr. Cotter took Gus off of the table for them, and Mary Eunice followed Lana through the haze back to the front desk, where Lana paid for the service and thanked them. She whistled, and Gus pounced after. One of the technicians gave him a treat, which he accepted on the fat of his tongue and munched right through. "What a cutie," the young woman sighed. "He's probably the best patient we'll see all day."

Lana's gaze wandered to Mary Eunice, who fought through the fog behind her eyes, and she took her by the arm and tugged to get her to pursue. "Miss!" Dr. Cotter returned from the back of the office with a piece of paper folded in his hand. They both turned to face him, Mary Eunice dazed when she realized he stared right at her. "I hope to see you again soon."

He passed her the piece of paper. "Um, thank you." He flashed the flirtatious smile once more. She swallowed around the painful lump in her throat and stumbled after Lana. Once the door had closed in their wake and they made their way back to the car, Mary Eunice coughed, weak, into her hand. "What was that about?" she asked Lana. Her eyes ran, and she dabbed them with her handkerchief. You're being stupid. It's not all that bad. It's all in your head.

Lana took the folded slip of paper from her hand; it crumpled aloud as she unfurled it. "He was hitting on you. It's his phone number. I swear, I'm going to start writing the word 'nun' on your forehead when we go out in public." She snorted. In her mind, Mary Eunice pictured Lana's facial expression, one eyebrow raised, lips forming a sarcastic smile. "I thought he would've gotten the hint—the way you looked at him when he smiled at you."

"The way I looked at him?" Mary Eunice repeated, faint. "I didn't like the way he made that face at me—but I didn't mean to look at him differently." Gus clambered into her lap and sponged his cold nose right against her cheek. A soft whistle followed. She lifted her hand and rested it on top of his head, thumb trailing one of his gray facial scars. A dark chuckle rose from Lana's throat. "You looked at him like you smelled some rotten garbage festering in the summer sun." Mary Eunice's nose crinkled. She's so poetic, even when it's not pretty. She's so eloquent. Lana reached across Gus and caught her hand by the fingertips. "Hey. Are you with me? You don't look so good."

Mary Eunice stifled the admittance. Oh, shut up. You're fine. You're making a big deal over nothing. "I'm okay." She lifted her head from the reclined position she had found and turned to
look at Lana. The dizziness danced right in the front of her head, tingling on the edges of the stabbing headache, which prodded straight through her eyes. "Don't worry."

"Do you feel faint at all?" Lana hadn't forgotten her collapse in the office, unseen by everyone else.

_Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor._ "No," Mary Eunice lied. A fist of guilt bundled in the pit of her stomach at the falsehood; she had never lied to Lana before, not deliberately. But if she confessed, Lana would worry and rile herself up over nothing. _She'll never know the difference. I'll be better by tomorrow._ "I'm fine, really." Her guts twisted with nausea; they pulsed in synchronization with her headache. "Let's go home."

Hesitation troubled Lana's face, but she allowed it to pass, and they drove home in relative silence, save for Gus's panting and whining and grumbling; he pawed at Mary Eunice whenever her hand stilled, demanding active participation in the affection he gained. She patted him, clumsy, like swatting a fly, but each one made his tail whirl up into a joyous flurry.

Back at home, Mary Eunice wrangled Gus through the front door and freed him from his leash. He darted toward the water bowl and lapped from it. Then, wasted from the morning of traveling, he flopped down in front of the blank television screen. Exhaustion swamped Mary Eunice, but she mucked through it like trekking through a bog up to her knees. With each step, the world sucked at her, fought to keep her in place while she struggled through it. She shed her coat and her shoes. A chill bit into her without them, goosebumps rising on her arms and legs. _Do I need to make lunch?_ Her belly twisted at the prospect of handling any food. A bitter, bile taste rose in the back of her swollen, raw throat, and she gulped around it. Her spongy tongue had sponged all of the saliva from her mouth, leaving her the dry flavor of decay. The taste of her own breath sickened her.

To her relief, Lana went to the kitchen and served herself another slice of cake. _That's got to be stale by now._ Lana hadn't complained of it. _You should make her something to eat._ But Lana's voice tugged her out of her reverie. "Do you want a sandwich? You didn't eat breakfast."

"No, I'm not hungry."

With a furrowed brow, Lana asked, "Are you sure? No crackers or anything?" Mary Eunice shook her head as her stomach twisted at the prospect. "Okay." The dubious tone returned to Lana's voice, mouth quirked in concern. _She's worried over nothing._ "I'm going to write for a little bit. Let me know if you need something, or if you don't feel well, okay?" She bobbed her head in agreement. "Maybe you should take a nap. You look miserable."

_I feel miserable._ Mary Eunice snorted, crinkling her eyes at the corners with her smile. "Thank you. You're charming, as always." She rubbed her hands down her arms to try and push some warmth back into them. At her touch, they ached. Her clothing stung where it brushed her skin. "I'm fine," she assured Lana when her teasing words didn't sate her troubled look.

To her relief, Lana let it lie, nodding to her before she vanished into the office; she left the door ajar, as usual, and Mary Eunice hovered until the familiar clicking of typewriter keys floated from the small room. Her itchy skin flushed, but when she scratched, her body burned with soreness. A thin layer of sweat sheened her hairline and face. She smeared it off with the back of one hand. _Don't be stupid. You're fine._ The sickened sensation in her stomach roared, but she pushed through it. She found the skirt she had torn on Saturday and took the sewing kit to the couch to repair the rip in the fabric.

She settled on the couch cushion, but no position provided her comfort, no matter how she folded her legs beneath her; her bones pounded with pain under her weight. Chills wracked her body.
Her sweating hands shivered while she threaded the needle, and each time she drew it through the fabric of her garment, she prodded herself in the thumb. Snot dribbled out of her nose, falling into her lap when she didn't catch it fast enough on her handkerchief. Shadows darted around in the edges of her vision. The light shimmered, a mirage of an oasis while she lingered on her desert of illness.

The needle punctured her thumb again. "Ouch." She drew it back. A drop of blood beaded at the surface of her skin. Don't be so clumsy. She tugged at the next stitch, pulled it through the cloth, only to tug it through the wrong side of the cloth. You're an idiot.

As she fumbled for the scissors to cut through the botched strings and remove them, Lana exited the office with a notebook and pen. "I need a change of scenery." Mary Eunice glanced at her. Lana sank onto the opposite end of the couch, her feet tucked beneath her. She turns so frenzied when she writes. The cute purse of her tastefully colored lips, the harried flare gained by her hair, the nervous fidget to her left hand, the anxious rhythm of her tapping toes (Mary Eunice particularly liked her crooked little toe on her right foot, the one that curled under the knuckle and refused to unbend)—the facets of Lana painted the cutest of pictures when she worried about the world inside of herself. Mary Eunice wondered about that world, the one in which only Lana lived, the one she spilled onto the page when she wrote.

Tucking a lock of brown hair behind her ear, Lana worried the end of her pen between her teeth before she struck the tip against the paper again. She wrote in crooked print letters, masculine in the scratched arrangement. When the words flowed, her letters looped together in strings, wedged somewhere between print and cursive. Mary Eunice didn't make out the words placed by Lana's hand, but she rather watched Lana as she placed them. As the pen worked its ink across the lines, Lana's left hand fluttered to her lips, where she began to gnaw on her fingernails. Paper rumpled aloud when she flipped to the next page of the notebook. I haven't made a stitch since she sat down.

At the realization, Mary Eunice jerked back to her skirt. Her bleeding thumb left a ruddy print on her handkerchief where she had stuck herself; she balled up the cloth and held it there in a press until the leakage stopped. Then, she threaded the needle and started over on the torn fabric. The edges frayed when she drew them together. Her fingertips brushed against the dangling strings. The man's voice reverberated in her mind, dark and dripping lust, infuriated at the women who dared to admit they didn't want his body: "What did you say to me, bitch? What did you say? See how brave you are now. You just haven't found the right man to put you in your place yet." She shuddered and wiped the sweat from her brow again.

Clumsy, trembling hands pushed through the rip in the skirt, connecting it in crooked stitches. Her fingers refused to hold steady. She jabbed herself several more times before she tied off the stitch. That looks terrible. It's crooked as a cow path. She folded the skirt in her lap. Her skin itched and burned and pulsed with pain. A catch in her throat pitched her forward into a dry cough, but when she inhaled again, the familiar wheeze puffed through her lungs. Black figures danced in her vision, grayed by the force of each cough. The haze became a complete mist. She fumbled for her handkerchief in her lap and tried to cover her mouth, and the next spew brought up the metallic, coppery flavor of blood.

Her nose streamed, and when she gasped for breath, heartbeat accelerated by the force of her coughing fit, her muscles quivered in a protest while her head spun around, unable to remember which way was up. As she collapsed, she landed against a solid, soft body, cold to the touch. The bold ringing in her ears muffled the voice beyond recognition. Her sweaty body seized against the foreign hands crawling on her arms and face. Where did Lana go? Lana's hands never would have felt so cold. The whole room chilled her. "Lana?"
She willed the buzzing in her ears to quiet so she could make out the distorted voice. "I'm right here." She's right there. Mary Eunice grappled for something to pull herself back up—up to where, she wasn't certain. She felt like she was a whale, having floundered herself to the beach, unable to reach the water again. "No, no, don't. Lie still a moment. Catch your breath." One of those frigid hands smoothed her hair off of her sweaty face. "Christ almighty, you're ill." Lana's arms wretched around her, but they provided no comfort; her body smarted underneath every gentle, loving touch. Mary Eunice closed her eyes and did as Lana asked, lying still with her head propped against the soft chest behind her. But the chills continued to wrack her body, and sweat poured off of her.

As she eased, Lana wriggled from beneath her. "It's okay," she soothed when Mary Eunice reached out for her, mumbling nonsense. Don't leave, I'm sorry. I'll be okay. Don't worry. "It's okay. I'm going to get the thermometer. I'll be right back, I promise." She draped the throw from the couch over Mary Eunice and tucked the remaining pillow under her head. "Stay here." Believe me, I'm not going anywhere. Mary Eunice's tongue darted across her lips, but it didn't moisten them. Her mouth had dried completely.

A cold, wet cloth mopped across her face, and she shuddered, whimpering a protest. "Sorry." Lana shook the thermometer and slipped it between her dry lips. "Under your tongue." She didn't let go of it, not trusting Mary Eunice to hold it steady. Mary Eunice dared to open her eyes and peek up at Lana. The world around her shimmered, and she squinted to make out Lana's fine features. She looks angry. You made her angry. You upset her. Stupid stupid stupid. But Lana's voice held none of that frustration. She smoothed her other hand over Mary Eunice's face. "Two more minutes." She leaned nearer so Mary Eunice could make out the nutty hue of her brown eyes in the lamplight, and her fingers curled to scratch her scalp. The gentle touch burned, but Mary Eunice relished in it nonetheless. "I'm sorry. I know you're tender. You're burning up."

But I like it when you touch me. Mary Eunice allowed her eyes to rest, closed, until Lana plucked the thermometer from between her lips and read it. "You're over 103. I could toast bread on your face." Lana's cold hands left her body when she shivered again. "Here—sit up. I got you some aspirin, and then you're going to lie down while I call the doctor and see what he says."

Mary Eunice sat up, swimming through an ocean of confused pain, and she gulped the pills with the tepid water Lana provided. "I'm okay," she mumbled, nearly drunken in her slurred delivery. "Don't worry." Her tongue had grown thick and stiff, reluctant to bend to her will, and her heavy eyelids fell shut, requiring full effort each time she opened them again.

"You're not okay. You're very sick." I don't want to be sick. "Come on. You're going to bed." Lana nudged her to her feet, and she swayed, but she didn't fall. I don't want you to fuss over me. Lana flanked her like a shadow as she floated down the hall, feeling detached from her body; Gus trotted after them, favoring his injured paw. He scrambled onto the bed with a couple pedals of his skinny hind legs, and then he flopped in the center, his tongue dropping out of his mouth while he waited for them to join him. "See, Gus is going to keep you company."

Mary Eunice sat on the edge of the bed and frowned; gravity pulled at her lips and hung them downward. Her cold sweat squished under her arms and between her legs, clung to her body in beads and trickled down her front, rubbed uncomfortably beneath her breasts. Her jaws chattered with her chilled shudders. "C-Could I, m-maybe, take a shower?" Gus thrust his head into her lap with a demanding whine, and she stroked him absentely.

The darker flecks inside Lana's nut-brown eyes expanded, and Mary Eunice found herself tumbling into the gaze, falling into Lana's tunnels, down the rabbit hole into her wonderland. "Sure." Lana studied her. "Go ahead. Be careful. Call for me if you need something, okay?" Mary Eunice bobbed her head, sending woozy pangs through her pulsating skull. "I'm still going to call
the doctor. They might have some idea of how to make you feel better."

*Don't bother. I'm alright.* Mary Eunice didn't trust her tongue to work, as it had pasted itself to the roof of her mouth again. Her chest strained with each inhale, and she wheezed, but she managed to restrain another fit of coughs. She squeezed Lana's hand, weak in spite of her effort, and found her feet. The floating sensation returned, like she hovered somewhere between worlds. A faint whispering rattled in the back of her head, wind through some old branches, but she shoved it away. She had to keep her focus to keep her balance. *Don't be stupid. You're fine. You're overreacting. You're just a baby.* Her hands fumbled on the buttons of her blouse, unable to loop them through, as they quivered with chill. Her reflection in the mirror gazed back at her, glassy-eyed and flushed, skin raised into goosebumps, hair stuck up in a blonde cloud.

The final button on her blouse refused to come undone, so she wriggled her way out of it like a too-tight T-shirt, and then she slithered out of her skirt and stockings. She had to pause, leaning on the counter of the sink, and catch her breath. Her sweating body throbbed with the cold air. The tremors intensified; she had lost her last defense. Gray hazed at the edges of her line of sight. *I'll be fine in the shower, under the hot water. I'll feel better.* Her feet tangled up in one another, and she kicked at invisible vines twining around her ankles. Each battling step sent her feet into the war zone.

In front of the shower, before she could reach the faucet, the tickle in her chest roared at her, and she doubled over to launch into another coughing fit. Her shriveled breasts heaved and squelched with nausea, but no matter how she gagged, she hadn't put anything in her body; she had nothing to expel but her own foul-tasting bile. Her throat, stripped raw and now burning a vengeance, produced a thin whimper.

The chilling rim of the toilet seat against her cheek pierced her psyche. *Get in the shower. You need to warm up.* She paid no heed to her flushed, blotchy reflection in the mirror as she staggered back to the bathtub and cranked up the water. It spewed out, and when the steam curled in the air, she dragged herself beneath it. The water stung her tender skin, but it didn't warm her. *It's so cold.* *Why is it so cold?* She turned off the cold water, only the hot cranked up to full blast, but it didn't feel hot, even as the steam could have suffocated her and her skin began to welt. It felt chilly. Her rubbery legs slipped over the smooth bottom of the tub as she grappled for the shampoo bottle. *I've got to get the sweat out of my hair.* Everything hazed. She gasped for clean air in the steam and choked on a mouthful of water. The dancing black figures, blots in her eyes, returned to her spinning head. *I can't breathe!* She sputtered into another set of coughs, this one much weaker than the preceding fit; she had no more strength. A broken gulp of air spilled forth into another spell. *Please, stop—God, help me.* Urine trickled down the inside of her thigh.

The blotted figures swelled and consumed her as vertigo overcame her, and she tumbled backward into the bathtub with the bleak darkness sucking away her awareness.

…

"You've reached Dr. Dillon's office," chimed a light female voice when Lana dialed for her doctor. She sat in the office chair with her head in one hand, worry boiling in her gut and sickening her. "Margot speaking. How can I help you today?"

She cleared her throat. "This is Lana Winters." Lying would have been pointless, much as she preferred to avoid the drama now attached to her name. "I need some advice. My friend is very sick." *If she starts in on me about having a friend, I'm going to hang up. Mary Eunice will forgive me.* Lana swallowed the bitterness in her mouth and fought to focus on the call.
"Oh, Miss Winters! It's nice to hear from you again." Lana bit the tip of her tongue, restraining herself from a sardonic response. "Very well. What are the symptoms?"

"She's been running a fever since Saturday morning. I started giving her Tylenol, but it would only drop for a few hours and then spike again. Aspirin, too. She's sneezing and coughing; it's just gotten worse. The coughing is awful. Last night, she started coughing up blood. She's light-headed and disoriented, and she won't eat anything." Lana hesitated, and then she continued, "She's twenty-seven, probably 140, 150 pounds. She hasn't had her flu shot."

"Hmm." The rest of the office life hummed in the background, voices chattering around, doctors and nurses and patients. "Those all sound like flu symptoms, alright." Paper crinkling crackled over the line as Margot flipped through her appointment book. "I'm sorry, Miss Winters, but we don't have an open appointment for three weeks." She cleared her throat. "The disorientation and dizziness are probably from dehydration. How high is her fever?"

Great. I'm going to have a hell of a time getting her to drink more. "It started at 102 yesterday, but it's only climbed since then. It was 103.2 the last time I checked it."

The nurse whistled, low and considerate. "Alright. That's awfully high, but if it is the flu and she didn't receive her vaccine—well, we can expect that." She hummed to herself as she shuffled papers and flicked through them, fidgeting. Lana toyed with a string attached to the sleeve of her blouse. "If it gets higher than, say, 104, take her to the ER. But her temperature should start to regulate itself if you can get her hydrated. And for the coughing—it's probably bronchitis, but again, if it worsens, get her to the hospital. You don't want her to get pneumonia."

That's what I'm afraid of. Lana sucked in a long breath through her nose and measured it slowly out her mouth to calm her fears. Seeing Mary Eunice like that, so ill, so weak, so vulnerable, frightened her, and Mary Eunice refused to acknowledge her own sickness for some reason that Lana couldn't fathom. She grew up in literal hell. She probably thinks you're going to throw her out or something ridiculous like that. You just need to let her know that will never happen. Lana pinched the bridge of her nose to clear the concerns out of her mind long enough to address the nurse. "Right. Are there any better ways to manage her symptoms? The coughing is killing her, and the fever has her chilling badly."

"Mix her up a hot toddy and dose her with cough syrup. She might still be miserable, but at the very least, they'll help her sleep." Right, nothing like getting my nun drunk. Lana sighed as she considered the nurse's advice. She had given Mary Eunice wine—a little whiskey wouldn't kill her, and it was for her own good. If it helped her rest easily, Lana would apologize later. "As for the chills, just let the fever run its course and try to keep her as comfortable as possible. Put a cold compress on her forehead, keep her drinking. Water, broth, juice, anything is good." The nurse broke off and hesitated, and Lana's heartbeat skipped a beat. In an awkward, uncomfortable tone, she continued, "I'm not sure how intimate you are with this friend, but try to keep up with her urine output. The color should give you a good idea if she's getting enough fluids."

We're not that close. A hot, red flush marred Lana's cheeks, and she caught her face in the palm of her hand. I don't think I would've done that to Wendy, let alone anyone else. She could picture it, knocking on the bathroom door and calling, "Don't flush! I have to see what color it is!" She choked on her own saliva at the prospect. "Thank you," she managed, voice stiff. "I'll see about that." Like hell I will. Through the wall, the sound of running water pounded as Mary Eunice turned on the shower.

Margot clicked her tongue. "Now, Miss Winters, I do have a few concerns—not about your friend, but you. Dr. Dillon is distressed that you missed your appointment with your OBGYN."

Lana's jaw tightened. Everything within her chilled as she lied to the friendly nurse. "I miscarried.
There was no reason to go." She pinched her legs together at the prospect of another doctor prodding her genitals with frigid metal instruments.

"Yes, I see that, and I'm terribly sorry." *I'm not.* "But it also says on your record that you were hospitalized for that incident, and that you had a minor surgery to repair some damage to your uterus." Suspicion dripped from Margot's tone, scolding a naughty child who had eaten too many cookies or pulled the dog's tail too hard. "Miss Winters, this doesn't look incredibly promising on your end." *I'm aware.* Lana bit back the sarcastic drawl and searched for some explanation, but before she could explore the boxes of her mind, the nurse harped on. "And that's beside the point. You still need to see your OB/GYN to make sure everything is in order—and it's also important to follow up with Dr. Dillon after a hospital stay. You shouldn't shirk on your health, especially after going through an ordeal like the one you experienced."

*And you would know all about my ordeal, wouldn't you?* Lana seethed; she sucked on her teeth to keep from fuming aloud at the prying, pushy nurse. *I called you for advice for my sick friend, not for a lecture on my own shortcomings.* But, as she worked an adequate response into order, Margot still chattering aloud about the importance of maintaining her health, something loud crashed through the wall—from the bathroom. "Sister?" Lana called. Gus barreled up the hallway with his tail tucked between his legs; he darted straight to her side and whined, pouncing up to try and paw at her lap. Then, he grabbed the flap of her skirt between his teeth and tugged. His whimper amplified, threatening to become a howl of distress. "I'm sorry, I have to go." She dropped the phone back into the cradle and leapt from the office chair. "Sister!"

When she reached the bathroom door, she didn't bother knocking; she tore it open, and steam, like smoke, poured out into the house, thicker and hotter than Lana had ever experienced it. "Mary Eunice!" Through the white shower curtain, Mary Eunice's gray outline lay splayed in the bottom of the tub. The heat smothered her like entering a sauna. She ripped the curtain back. The scalding water jetted into her face. Sputtering, she snatched to turn off the water.

Mary Eunice lay in the bottom of the tub, splayed out and small, with great red flushes of burns across her body. *Oh, no.* Mary Eunice's chest had a shallow, quick rhythm through her parted lips. A groan, at first so quiet that Lana scarcely heard it, rumbled inside her. "Lana?" The bare croak of her voice wandered upward with her eyes, narrowed into slits. "I…" Lana braced for the inevitable—that Mary Eunice, even now, would try to reassure her that everything was fine, that she was okay, Lana didn't need to worry. But Mary Eunice's pretty blue eyes averted. "I don't feel so good."

"Of course you don't. You're terribly sick." The slender body quaked in a shivering tremor. *You can't let her lie there.* "Did you hurt anything when you fell? Is anything broken?"

A hushed hum emerged from her. "I don't—I don't think so." She shuddered; her legs, beads of water caught in their fine hair, folded up nearer to her chest in some attempt to bring herself comfort. "It's so—so cold. Lana grazed her with her gaze, searching for any injuries, but she found none. "Everything hurts—my chest—I can't breathe—" She choked off into a series of feeble coughs.

*You should've been taking care of her before this. It shouldn't have gotten to this point.* A hollow sensation wrenched through her gut. She grabbed Mary Eunice under the arms where the top of
the towel met her sodden skin; tufts of cream-colored hair, slick and wiry, met Lana's hands. "Put your arms around my neck. Let's get you out of here." Mary Eunice hiccups into her ear as she obeyed, puny in her obedience, and Lana dragged her out of the bathtub, long legs dangling; she grappled to get her feet underneath her, but her weak knees refused to support her. Her breath caught in her throat and cracked with panic. "It's okay, I've got you."

"Lana—" Her words died when a tremor cut her off, shuddering through her. Eyelids falling closed, her grip around Lana's neck slackened, and Lana fought to hold her up.

"Hold onto me," Lana instructed again. "I've got you." She tucked in the towel so it wouldn't fall. "You're going to be okay." Puddles collected on the tile beneath their feet where the water ran off of Mary Eunice, raining from her legs and drenched hair. "Let's get you to bed." Mary Eunice uttered an unintelligible mumble in return. Lana hauled her through the bathroom into the large bedroom, Mary Eunice stumbling and staggering all the way. She ripped back the covers and shoved Mary Eunice beneath them. She tucked all of the blankets up around her chest. "Okay. Stay here. I'm going to get you something to drink."

A white hand caught her wrist. "Stay," Mary Eunice pleaded, lower lip protruding into a pout. Red blotches covered her skin. Lana wondered, Are those burns from the hot water, or just fever marks? Regardless, she shuddered in pain wherever Lana touched her. "Please don't leave." Her glazed eyes seemed to stare straight through Lana. Pink mouth trembling, she licked her chapped lips; a few more squeaks left her chest, but she didn't craft another sentence.

A soft sigh blew from Lana's nose. She caressed Mary Eunice's cheek, and the blue eyes fluttered shut, lips twisting downward. It hurts her. But, before she could remove her hand, Mary Eunice placed hers over it, holding it in place. "I'll be right back, I promise. Trust me." Gus scrabbled his way back onto the bed and flopped beside Mary Eunice, resting his head on her shoulder. "Gus is going to stay with you."

Pink tongue sponging her cheek, Mary Eunice wriggled. "Puppy." She teased his ears with her quivering fingers, unable to give him satisfactory strokes. He lapped at her, skinny tail fanning out behind him on the bed. "Good puppy."

Lana freed her hand from where Mary Eunice had pinned it and leaned forward to press a delicate kiss to her forehead, just below her hairline. The familiar, rainy scent returned, clinging to her wet hair. "I'll be right back. Stay here. No shenanigans." She smoothed the sticky, wet strands of hair out of Mary Eunice's face before she rose from the side of the bed. "Good puppy."

She poured a glass of ice water and rifled through her cabinets to find her bottle of whiskey. After mixing it with some lemon juice and water, she popped it in the microwave until it steamed, and then she squeezed in some honey and stirred. "She might decide the cough syrup is preferable to this," she muttered under her breath. Maybe I could convince her to drink two of them. The more water she gets in her, the better. Hell, I could really use one right now. She shoved a bag of crackers into her pocket and returned to Mary Eunice, who drowsed with her eyes half-open and gave Lana no greeting. Lana got the cough syrup from the bathroom medicine cabinet.

When she grazed a hand over Mary Eunice's scabby left arm, the blonde's eyelids fluttered, and she turned her head to squint up at Lana. "Hey, sunshine." The moniker relaxed the pained lines around Mary Eunice's mouth. "Here, let's sit you up." She took one hand and helped tug her up, and then she tucked more pillows under her head. Mary Eunice cringed, pasting her eyes closed, as her face whitened. Sympathy stabbed into Lana's belly. "Open. I've got the gross stuff for you." Mary Eunice didn't form a protest, making an O with her mouth so Lana could pop the spoon into her mouth. "Good." Her throat bobbed when she gulped the medicine, and Lana took the glass of
ice water and probed her lips with the straw. "Sip. It's just water."

Obedient, Mary Eunice took the straw into her mouth and sucked. Each swallow made an audible click in her throat, and after only three of them, she rejected it. "It hurts," she rapped. Gus thrust his cold nose into her armpit, and she flinched and shuddered at the sensation. "It's so—cold—"
She gathered up the blankets, chin wobbling.

"I know, I know. I'm going to see if this warms you up at all." Lana took the warm mug between her hands. "It doesn't taste very good," she warned, "but I want you to try to drink it. The nurse said so."

The rim of the mug touched Mary Eunice's lower lip, and she opened her mouth with the most trusting of looks fixed upon Lana; once the mixture of hard liquor poured onto her tongue, her face screwed up in protest. She shook her head, tongue curling against the burning. A series of dry sputters followed her swallow. "It's like drinking fire."

Lana chuckled. "It's not that bad. It will make you feel better, I promise." Mary Eunice's trusting look faded into one of skepticism. "C'mon, the nurse said you should drink it. Give it another taste. It gets easier the more you drink." With her cajoling, Mary Eunice put the mug back to her lips and sipped; she persisted through the lick of flames down her throat. "Good. Drink it all." Lana placed her hand on the mat of her hair as the tonic disappeared from the mug, leaving only a ring on the bottom. "Do you want some crackers?"

Blue eyes darted away from Lana's. "I'm not hungry. M'tummy hurts."

"Okay. Will you drink some more water? You've been dizzy because you're dehydrated."

"M'Kay." Lana offered the straw to her, and she sucked at it a bit longer, until she began to cough again. Not this again. Lana propped her up; Mary Eunice swayed, so Lana held onto her as she gasped her way through the wheezing, hacking fit. She spewed until all the color had drained out of her face. "Lana," she squeaked once she could manage a word.

Her name on Mary Eunice's chapped lips from the sore, raw throat crushed the shards of Lana's broken heart. "I'm right here. I won't leave," she assured, smoothing her hand through Mary Eunice's tangled hair. "What do you need?"

"Will you hold me?" she requested, thin and sickly with her tremble. "Please?" She offered one of her hands, opening at the palm, an invitation, a plea.

"Sure." Lana peeled back the covers on the bed. "Scoot over." She nudged Mary Eunice over to make room, and then she crawled onto the mattress. She lay on her back and spread an arm out, and Mary Eunice curled up beside her, head resting on Lana's collarbones. "Good girl." Lana tugged up the blankets to cover her exposed shoulders. The towel had begun to slip, and the water, which clung to Mary Eunice's nude body, seeped into Lana's clothing. "You let me know if you get too warm, okay?" Her body had lost some of its heat, and Lana breathed a quiet, relieved sigh.

"Mhm." Mary Eunice snuggled with her arm around Lana's abdomen. Her eyelashes brushed the underside of Lana's jaw each time she blinked. "I love you." The tip of her nose bumped against Lana's pulse point, where her heart leapt alongside the proximity of their bodies.

Lana turned her head and pressed a tender kiss to the top of Mary Eunice's head. I love you, more than you know, more than I should. If you knew, it would scare you. If you knew, you would hate me. She smoothed her hand up one of the bare shoulders to try and bring some comfort; Mary Eunice shivered at the touch upon her hypersensitive, feverish skin. Lana stilled before she
removed her hand. "I'm sorry."

"Don't stop."

Eyes darting down to glance at the side of her face, Lana's brows quirked at the request. "But it hurts you." The cold, damp hair brushed Lana's neck and sent chills down her spine, but the bundle of blankets and woman surrounding her kept her encased in warmth.

Mary Eunice chewed the inside of her cheek. "I don't care. I would rather touch you." She lay motionless, save for the rise-fall rhythm of her chest, but her eyes remained open. "Thank you." Lana's hand returned to its place on her shoulder, and a soft pink smile curled on her lips; its impression was slight but mighty. "I'm sorry. I know you're busy." A light slur marred her voice, mingled alcohol and exhaustion.

Busy? Was that what this was all about? "I'm never too busy to take care of you. I shouldn't have let you get so sick." She rested her left hand upon Mary Eunice's cheek, and the face nuzzled into it like a cat rubbing against a favored human companion. "Do you feel a little better now?" At least she isn't fainting anymore.

"Mhm."

"Good. Get some rest." The arm around Lana's waist tightened in its clinging. "Don't worry, I won't leave. You need to let your body heal. Don't worry about me." The glazed blue eyes remained upon her face until Lana extended her hand and flicked the lids closed with her fingertips. The resulting giggle, flimsy and muted, lit a fire inside Lana's stomach. "Have some sweet dreams, sunshine." Mary Eunice hummed under her breath, an acquiescence, and cuddled against Lana's body, expression relaxing.

Lana lay there in the silence, one arm gradually numbing, and exhaled as the affection flushed from the soles of her feet all the way up through her chest and face. This is wrong. I can't feel this way about her. Her stomach curled inside her, mingling disgust and self-loathing with unrequited love so everything ached. I haven't even known her that long.

A single tear trickled down her cheek, and she couldn't move to dab it away, keeping her arms wrapped around Mary Eunice. I don't love her. It's impossible to love someone so fast. I'm just hurt, and I miss Wendy, and this isn't real. It can never be real.

With every breath through Mary Eunice's open mouth, her chest expanded against Lana's, and god, if it didn't feel real. The rebounded love, the emotion that belonged to Wendy and now had nowhere to rest its head, had fixed itself to Mary Eunice and clung to her like a leech. If she isn't the most beautiful thing left on this earth... Lana's hand combed through the golden hair, gentle and slow so she wouldn't disturb the sleeping woman cuddled beside her. Maybe it's best this way. As long as she fixated on Mary Eunice, she would steer clear of any awful, rebound relationships—or worse, drunken, anonymous sex with any stranger she found at Pat Joe's. While Lana promised her heart to Mary Eunice, and Mary Eunice promised her heart to God, she was safe in her unrequited feelings.

About an hour passed with Lana lost in her own head until Mary Eunice moved again, shifting her face on Lana's chest. "Lana?"

"I'm here. It's only been an hour."

"My head feels kinda fuzzy." Mary Eunice wiggled, retracting her arm from around Lana's waist, while Lana considered the words and sought a cure. A deep breath crackled in Mary Eunice's chest, snatching both of them from their reveries. The coughing fit pitched through her. She struggled upright to wheeze and hack, and Lana leaned behind her, supporting her weight. The
towel fell from around her, but Mary Eunice didn't fiddle with it, too preoccupied in fighting for
breath, so Lana caught it by the hem and plucked it back up before she kneaded the heel of one
hand into her back, hoping to relieve some of the pressure. As the fit abated, Mary Eunice's hands
worried the hem of the towel, tucking it back in. "I gotta pee."

Lana scooted off the edge of the bed. "Go, go pee." Mary Eunice tiptoed out of bed. "Are you
okay by yourself?" Part of Lana didn't want to relinquish her, didn't trust her to stay upright, but
Mary Eunice nodded, and Lana didn't dare invite herself to the bathroom alongside her. "Okay.
Be careful." As Mary Eunice staggered away, swaying but keeping herself on her feet, Lana
collected the empty mug and the melted glass of ice water and headed to the kitchen.

She mixed another hot toddy and refilled the glass with ice, and while she was in there, she made
a bologna sandwich; this garnered Gus's attention, so she gave him his kibbles and draped a slice
of bologna over it. Then, she stuffed her sandwich into her mouth and sated her empty stomach
before she returned to the bedroom. Through the door frame, Mary Eunice stood with her back to
Lana, naked. The pale cheeks of her ass hosted ripples of cellulite; a bundle of hair blurred the
fleshy lips between her thighs. Thick, horizontal scars crossed the flesh from her lower back all the
way to her thighs, places where someone had laid a cane across Mary Eunice hard enough to
break skin and leave wounds.

Jude,
Lana seethed.

Too late, after she had already drunk in the sight of the nude woman before her, Lana turned her
back and counted to twenty-five; when she whirled again, Mary Eunice had clad herself in the
heavy fleece nightgown and folded into the bed where she belonged. Lana entered the room. Am I
blushing? Dear god, I hope I'm not blushing. A naked woman had never failed to make Lana feel
like a foolish, horny teenager, not since she had kissed Wendy for the first time all those years ago.

"Here." Lana handed her the warm mug of the hot toddy; Mary Eunice peaked into it, her lip
curling at the corner, before she lifted it to her mouth and sipped. She cringed as she gulped it, and
then she went at it again. The deeper she delved, the easier it went down. Lana put the back of her
hand to Mary Eunice's cheek, then to her forehead. "You don't feel as hot." When Mary Eunice
gave her the mug back, she offered, "Do you want another one?"

"No." The word drawled out, slow. "Makes me feel fuzzy." She muffled a yawn with the palm of
her hand. "But I don't hurt so bad." With her hands drawn into fists, she rubbed her eyes like a
sleepy child. Lana gave her the glass of water. It took her several tries to get the straw in her
mouth. Once, she poked herself in the nose. "I feel really—warm—and happy…"

Lana snorted. "You're just feeling the hot toddy." Mary Eunice's brow furrowed at her, and she
clarified, "I got you a little drunk. You're going to be fine. Four ounces of whiskey never killed a
person. Do you want to eat something?" Mary Eunice shook her head. She scooted over in the
bed, an invitation, and Lana inclined her eyebrows at her hastiness to return to their previous
position. "Alright, alright. I'm going to take Gus outside first. Hang out here for a few minutes."
The big blue eyes widened with anxiety, though Mary Eunice formed no protest. Lana pawed
around under the edge of the bed with her foot until she found the shoebox that Mary Eunice liked
to keep her few things, and she kicked it out into view and took the spare rosary from it. "Here.
Hold onto this."

The beads folded into Mary Eunice's palm, cupped like a wounded bird, and she brought them
against her chest. "Thank you," she murmured. She wound the string around her hand and rubbed
the crucifix between her thumb and index finger, a tiny smile upon her lips. With the religious
artifact so close, she relaxed upon the pillows; at the sight of her lost tension, Lana allowed her
shoulders to droop from their rigid position. She pecked Mary Eunice on the forehead and headed
back up to the living room to leash Gus, who had just finished his meal.

The cold air buffeted them, but he hurried to do his business, much to Lana's relief, and she
brought him back into the house and unleashed him. He trotted back to the bedroom ahead of Lana and gracelessly clambered onto the mattress beside Mary Eunice, who had dozed off with her head turned away. When Lana sat beside her on the bed, though, she roused and opened her arms, murmuring Lana's name. Lana grinned in spite of herself as she kicked up beside her. "I'm here, don't worry. Go back to sleep."

"You're cold..." Mary Eunice scrambled with her arms in awkward monkeying jerks to wreath Lana in warmth. One of her legs slid beneath Lana's, one on top, and they knotted together at the ankles, pinning Lana there on the bed. "I'll warm you up." A faint giggle floated from pink lips, steamy breath flavored with the slight scent of whiskey.

"I'm glad you feel better." *Your knee is in my crotch.* Lana slid her arm around Mary Eunice's shoulders and tried her best to ignore the pressure of the bony knee thrust between her thighs. "You're awfully clingy," she teased, flicking her fingers through the drying strings of blonde hair. "I'll have to give you those toddies more often."

Mary Eunice nuzzled her blushing face into the crook of Lana's neck. "I like touching you. You're always so—soft—" She sniffed long through her stuffy nose. "'N you're awfully pretty."

"Well, thanks."

A flush of embarrassment crawled up Lana's neck and face, but before she could think of an adequate response, Mary Eunice rambled onward. "'N you smell nice. I can't tell right now, 'cause my nose is stopped up, but I know so." Her hand, palm down, slid across Lana's belly, rubbed in tight circles while Mary Eunice mused, eyes half-open and lashes brushing Lana's skin each time she blinked. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Coiling one strand of hair around her index finger, Lana's wandering eyes dipped down to Mary Eunice, the parts she could make out from the bundle of woman clinging to her. "That's awfully sweet of you to say."

"And if it's true, I'm really sorry. Someone should have loved you before now. "You should try to get some more sleep," she encouraged, an afterthought, though she secretly hoped Mary Eunice would nod off before the liquid courage made her say something more revealing. "Aren't you sleepy?"

"Uh-huh," she affirmed. A yawn, humid in its texture, warmed the underside of Lana's jaw. "But I don't wanna sleep. I wanna enjoy you." Lana snorted a chuckle at the words, rolling her eyes. *It's not like we do this every night or anything.* "Lana?" Mary Eunice pressed. "Can I tell you something?"

"I don't know. Would you tell me if you didn't feel so good right now?"

Mary Eunice considered with a low hum. "Mmm... Probably not." She wriggled her legs; the knee between Lana's legs kneaded deeper into her crotch, and she winced at the resulting pressure which she had no desire to relieve. "But I really wanna tell you."

Biting her lip, she reluctantly agreed, "Alright." *It can't be that bad. She's a nun. Unless she remembered something. Oh god, what if she remembered something? What if there's a body we need to go hide and she's sick? Would she even help me hide the body or would she just turn herself in? Hopefully the demon was neat and cleaned up after itself like it did with Clara.*

"Sometimes..." Mary Eunice drifted off, but her fingers drummed upon Lana's belly, an indication that she hadn't dozed off mid-sentence. She sniffled through her stuffy nose and exhaled out her mouth. "I wish that I was allowed to kiss you. I think it would be nice to kiss you."

"Oh my god. All the air rushed out of Lana's lungs; Mary Eunice had punched her in the gut. The resulting empty feeling tinged relief with confusion. "Is that it?" *She definitely wouldn't want me to know that.* Lana played with her hair to distract herself from the revelation. *Is she trying to tell me she likes girls in some ass-backward, nunnery-style way?*
"No." The innocent tone to her voice darkened with sadness. A shiver came to her quiet, low voice. "I'm really bad, I think bad things—I have lustful thoughts." A crackle in her chest sent both of them lurching upward to cough; the fit didn't last as long as some of the others, but each cough weakened Mary Eunice where her hands slackened upon Lana's. "I'm sorry." Her eyes watered before she managed a sneeze. "I'm bad."

"You're not bad—honestly, you're as harmless as an earthworm." Lana fumbled for the tissue box to wipe Mary Eunice's leaky nose; when her clumsy hands tried to take over, Lana batted them away, shushing her. She dabbed at the corners of her eyes. "Tell me what's so horrible. I promise you it's not nearly as awful as you think."

A vague hum followed, and Lana realized she might have demanded too much of Mary Eunice, but her friend mumbled with downcast eyes, "D'you remember, when we found Gus in the storm, and I had that dream, and you woke me up?" Lana nodded as she reflected, the memory now dimmed by everything else that had happened that night. "And I told you it was about us, in the garden of Eden, and we were married?"

As Lana agreed, Mary Eunice chewed her lower lip; her hand went to claw at her left arm until Lana grabbed it and wrapped it in her own. Mary Eunice glanced down in surprise, so absorbed in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed her nervous habit surfacing. "You don't have to tell me. You don't owe me anything." The morbid curiosity prickled within Lana, craving knowledge of Mary Eunice's secret inner workings. Don't be that way. If she doesn't want to tell, you don't want to know.

The averted gaze didn't find its way back to Lana. When the lip left from between her teeth, it trembled in distress. "We weren't just married." A beaded tear rolled down her cheek, not just runny eyes but an expression of wrenching emotion, and Lana offered her a sympathetic smile and dabbed it away with her thumb. "I dreamed we were making love—" The word strangled, an incomplete thought, as her distress rose into a sob. "I'm so sorry—I didn't mean it—I just love you so much—I'm so awful—I'm so stupid—I'm as bad as Bloody Face—"

The initial shock left Lana flabbergasted into silence while Mary Eunice stammered her way through half a dozen incomplete apologies, each one building her despair, but the last one shook Lana from her brief, surprised reverie. "No." She caught Mary Eunice by the shoulders. "You're nothing like him. Absolutely nothing."

The watery layer to her eyes crafted the illusion of two algae-flecked ponds. Lana gazed into them, seeking to pull all of the sorrow out of them. "Listen to me." The tears breached the brim and trickled down. Mary Eunice attempted to look away, but Lana moved her hands from her shoulders to her face. "Listen. I don't ever want you to believe that, not for a second." The pink lips and dimpled chin shivered. Lana combed one thumb over her cheek to smear away another falling tear. "Have you ever wanted to hurt me?"

"N-No!" Mary Eunice's eyes fluttered wide. "Never!"

A tiny smile found Lana's lips, not truly happy but rather wry and rueful. "And you just had that nightmare, last night, about me, remember? You thought someone wanted to hurt me. It scared you." Mary Eunice bobbed her head in a frightened agreement. "There's the difference." Lana's brow furrowed. "You can't help what you dream, or what you think, or what you want."

"But—But—" Mary Eunice's stammer found no end, and she closed her eyes, unable to avoid Lana's gaze in any other way. "I'm sorry. Everything is all jumbled up in my head. You gave me that gross drink and now nothing makes sense and I feel funny."
Lana chuckled, inclining her eyebrows. "It was supposed to make you sleepy." She leaned forward to where she had clasped Mary Eunice's face between her palms. Stop. Don't do it. Their faces almost touched before she grappled her self-control by the reins and halted, unable to pull away but unwilling to move forward. She is not yours. You don't want her. She doesn't want you. You'll ruin everything. Nothing fucks a friendship like an awkward, unwanted kiss. A pining sigh fluttered through her parted lips, wafting across Mary Eunice's face. Don't take this from her. She trusts you.

At Lana's warm breath misting across her lips, Mary Eunice opened her eyes. They flitted up to Lana's, uncertain, questioning, but before Lana could snatch away and stutter an apology, one slim, pale hand found hers; the calloused heel of Mary Eunice's palm scraped against Lana's, fixing her on the spot. "Can I…?"

"Yes."

Breath hitched in her throat, Lana's heart rate leapt and thrashed, a firing squad in her every vein and artery. Mary Eunice's lips were wet from tears and saliva and snot where they touched Lana's, slightly puckered, like she couldn't decide how much was enough. It lasted half of a second, brushed and then pulled away. If it weren't for the crimson blush upon Mary Eunice's face, Lana could have convinced herself it didn't happen at all. "That wasn't so bad." Mary Eunice's voice was as breathless as someone who had just come down from an orgasm. Lana had to bite back a laugh, and the smirk spread across her face regardless. "What?" Mary Eunice looked back at her, bewildered.

"Nothing." Lana wound her arms around Mary Eunice's waist and tugged, and Mary Eunice fell against her, smooth and graceful. "I'm glad you didn't puke on me." Mary Eunice giggled as she curled up beside Lana once more, placing her legs and arms in the same place as before, but her knee steered clear of Lana's crotch, much to her relief. "Do you feel sleepy now?"

"A little." Her hand shifted up from Lana's abdomen to her chest, just below the place where her head rested on Lana's collarbones. "Your heart..." She exhaled, eyes drowsing. "It's like a woodpecker." Her nose rattled with stuffiness when she inhaled through it. "Thank you." Lana combed a hand through her stringy hair. "I love you."

"I love you." I shouldn't, but I do. Mary Eunice's blue eyes wandered up to her and fixed her with the adoring stare, and Lana smoothed her hand over the pale forehead. "Get some rest." Mary Eunice nodded against Lana's chest, but she didn't lull to sleep; her body remained steady in its movement, the twitching foot, the fluttering of air through her parted lips. She's thinking. Lana reclined on the pillows, wondering what traversed Mary Eunice's sickly, tipsy mind. Will she regret this tomorrow? The soft tangles of the blonde hair curled beneath her fingers. I hope not.
Mary Eunice awoke in a delirium. Her head throbbed between the temples, and a cold chill wracked through her body. She wheezed through her parted lips; pain stabbed through her chest when she coughed. Each brush of the blankets and clothing against her skin made her whimper. *Everything hurts.* The next cough sputtered from her and refused to halt, each one beckoning the next from the depth of her chest. The raw flesh of her throat wailed at her, cried for her to stop, for the whistling air set flames down it, the only warm thing within sight. Everything else was frigid, like she'd fallen into a snowbank where the snowflakes were glass shards, stabbing into her at every angle and slicing her open. The air tasted sour. *God, help me.*

She gasped for air, but none of her puffs would remain in her lungs.

Thin arms grappled around her body. *What?* She yelped in surprise at the touch, the constricting over her shoulders as the painful touch guided her upward. Her spine had no strength and threatened to spill her over. The enveloping arms held her upright; she doubled over at the waist. *It hurts, stop it, where, who?* Her skin twitched in some attempt to loosen the grip fastened to her. "Oh, god, your fever's gone back up." *Fever.* Everything flicked through her mind in a brief glimmer. *Lana.* "Breathe, sunshine, it's okay." A palm stuck to Mary Eunice's sweaty, teary cheek. Its contact stung her, but she didn't dare retreat from the tender caress in spite of the flare of pain.

When her breath came clear once again, saliva pooled in her mouth, and she gulped to keep it from stringing out like the snot pouring from her nose. Lana wiped it with her handkerchief. *Lana, it hurts.* Her weak shot at speech emerged in a pathetic, unintelligible mewl. *I don't want to die.* Pale hands clawed at the blanket, fighting to pull it back over herself and bundle away from all the freezing temperatures surrounding her.

A bedside lamp flicked on at her side, and Mary Eunice shielded her eyes with one tossed hand, whimpering in protest. Agony pulsed just behind her eyes and blinded her, all white. "I know, I'm sorry." Lana's hand on her face plucked her lips apart, probing with the tip of a thermometer. "Open, under your tongue. Close. Good girl." *It hurts, please, make it stop.* Tears budded in her eyes and breached the brims of her eyelids. Her dry breath whistled through her stuffy nose. *Please, I can't breathe.* "I'm sorry." Fingertips brushed the tears off of her cheeks. "I'm sorry, sunshine. Please don't cry. I just want you to be better."

*Sunshine.* Mary Eunice ordinarily bloomed when Lana gave her that particular nickname, but now it stung like everything else. *I don't feel very sunny right now.* She coughed around the thermometer, but Lana cradled her steady. "It's almost done. Try to lie still. I know, you must be hurting something terrible." Mary Eunice sucked air in through her nose and whimpered, somewhere high in her throat. *Lana, please.* She didn't know what she wanted; Lana couldn't take this pain from her, but she craved relief, and she had come to regard Lana as the panacea for all of
her ills. The thermometer slipped back from between her lips. "Good god. Okay. We've got to bring it down. Hold tight."

Mary Eunice's hands flopped around, seeking Lana's. *Stay, please, don't leave.* She found nothing but the cold on top of the blankets. A grunt wriggled up from her throat, burned it and made it sting on the inside, so she stifled it and waited for Lana to return. *What if she doesn't come back? What if she leaves?* The childish question reared to life in her head, and Mary Eunice wished she had the strength to call out, but she couldn't manage it. She fought to defend Lana to herself, to her own demons. *Lana would never.* And, like magic, the cold hands returned to her. "Sit up. We're going to kill this with some more aspirin."

Lana dragged her up from beneath the covers; she garbled a weak protest at the air chilling all over her body. "I'm sorry. No blankets until your temperature goes down." Lana poured the pills out of the palm of her hand into Mary Eunice's mouth and put a straw to her lips. "Suck, drink. You need to cool down." *But I feel so cold.* She drank the water obediently, slurping at the straw and forcing down big gulps past the painful knot in her throat. She swallowed until the straw brought up air. "Good, good. Let me get you some more."

"No—" Mary Eunice's voice formed a thin, weak, low croak. *I sound like a frog.* "Please." Each word raked devilish claws down the inside of her throat. *Stay.* Terror curled up in the pit of her belly, like something terrible would happen if she didn't cling to Lana. Lana kept her alive; Lana was her heartbeat and each breath in her pained lungs. What if the Shachath came back? She didn't want to die! *Please, Lana, don't leave me.* She caught the front of Lana's thin pajama top, unaware of how much time had passed, how long she had lain in this bed, suffering. It hadn't hurt so much when Lana gave her that awful drink. *Why does it hurt?*

Lana placed her hand over Mary Eunice's. "I'm just going to get you some more water, sunshine." *I don't want you to leave! I'm scared!* The panic flooded her lower abdomen and sapped all of her energy, weakening her grasp as Lana pulled her hand away. "Don't be afraid. I'll be right back." Mary Eunice bleated another protest, and Lana shushed her. She plucked up the rosary from where it had vanished under the covers. *Hold tight to Jesus.* The string of beads wrapped around her fingers, but it provided no comfort, not nearly comparable to the fortress of Lana's arms, no matter the pain her touch caused.

Cold lips kissed Mary Eunice's forehead before Lana vanished, and their moisture beaded on the heat of her face, evoking the memory of Lana's sweet, strawberry flavored lips. *I really did that. That wasn't a dream. Oh, God, forgive me. Sister Jude always told me drunkenness caused folly.* Her dry tongue darted out to lick her lips, tasting if any of Lana's precious taste remained, but it had all faded, and the whiskey smeared her memory like a finger dragged through wet paint. She wanted to remember what Lana felt like. *Oh, don't be disgusting. You're lucky Lana isn't upset with you. She loves Wendy, not you. She ought to throw you out.* Mary Eunice dragged the blankets up in her clenched fists and tucked them around her chin. The chill steamed off of her skin, not stemming from the outside but rather from her own overheated body. Another long ache tingled through her bones, and another whine grew in her chest without her consent, tears budding in her eyes.

Thick shadows danced on the edge of the bed. She couldn't feel them, but just at the corner of her eyes, they peered back at her, blood pouring out of their crimson eyes. "No," she whispered, "no, please." One skeletal, scabby hand wrapped around her wrist, piercing her with the frigidity of the haunting, broken soul beneath. Yellow teeth hung in a skull under the hood of a black cloak; skin hung off of the cheekbones in ragged slabs of rotting muscle. The stench curled on her tongue. "Stop—" Her croaking voice died as the face loomed over her.

Black and brown spiders, each the size of her hand, skittered up from the foot of the bed and
toward her, nasty legs straining toward her, fangs and eyes gleaming. A patchy shriek curdled in her throat. The agony following was like a dagger slicing up from the hollow of her throat all the way up to her jugular. The spiders didn't cease; they crawled up her arms, down the front of her nightgown, all over her face, between her legs. She clawed at her face and arms to try and dislodge them with her fingernails, drawing back bloody fingertips. A corpse lolled upward from the ground, matted black hair and eyeless sockets glaring at her. "You killed me," accused Clara. "You. You killed me." Her teeth rattled, and black blood poured from her gaping jaws and the stab wounds in her neck.

The resulting blubbering, a torturous wail, made her crumple into a ball, hiding her face in her hands. Her stomach lurched. A hand closed around her shoulder, and she howled again. "It's okay, it's okay." Lana's arms allowed Mary Eunice to burrow right beside her as she sat on the edge of the bed. "What's wrong? What happened?" Mary Eunice stuffed her nose into Lana's armpit and didn't manage a single sensible word. Her broken sobs of horror mingled with coughs. "Breathe, sunshine. Come on, sit up." Lana's dragging hands plucked her back upright, stinging wherever they touched her skin. Mary Eunice coughed, nearly gagging as she pushed the hot air up out of her lungs. Lana held her hair back out of her face until she stopped. "Good. What's the matter?"

"I saw—" Her throat closed around her words. The air whistled over the raw flesh, but she couldn't form the sounds. Face crumpling, Lana tugged her nearer, and she flopped like a ragdoll upon Lana's chest before her arms wound around her neck and found the safety she had sought. "Spuh—Spuh—" Spiders wouldn't come out. She shivered. Sweat caked her hair to her face and covered her skin. "Lan…" Her vision rotated like it was fixed on an axel. "Hurts."

"Your fever is really high. You're seeing things that aren't there," Lana kept plucking the strands of hair from where they stuck to her face. "I know it hurts. I wish I could fix it." The back of her hand felt up Mary Eunice's face. "God, you're so hot. I can't let you sit like this. Come here." Her arms gathered up around Mary Eunice's waist and tugged her out of the bed, eliciting a squeak of surprise when her rubbery legs almost refused to catch her. Lana held her upright and dragged her toward the bathroom.

Teeth chattering, Mary Eunice kept one hand clutched to Lana's nightgown, fearful she would collapse without the support. "I've got you, I won't let you fall." Lana's words made a promise. "I'm going to put you in the tub. Can I take off your gown?" Mary Eunice bobbed her head, one hand fixing to the sink so she wouldn't fall the instant Lana pulled away from her. Lana gathered it up by the hem of the skirt and tugged it up over her head, exposing her white body to the bright bathroom light. An index finger caught in the elastic of her panties and snatched them down over her skinny, knobby legs. When she lifted a leg to try and step out of them, her balance disintegrated somewhere between her intention and her coordination; she swayed like a sapling in a strong breeze, clutching at the edge of the sink. But Lana steadied her, two hands fixed around her waist. "Hold onto me. I won't drop you."

Everything around Mary Eunice blurred when she sat in the bathtub. She curled up. "Cold," she whispered. The shimmering light stabbed into her eyes. "Bright."

"Let me get the water running, and I'll turn the light off." The sound of the faucet drilled through her head, loud, overpowering, drowning her out. The first drops that touched her feet made her recoil at the frigid temperature. "I'm fixing it, relax." Lana adjusted it a few times until steam lifted off of the cascading water. "I can't make it hotter than this. You burned yourself earlier. I don't want that to happen again." She retreated from the side of the tub and killed the lights; when she returned, she took one of Mary Eunice's wet hands from the water. "There. I know you're miserable right now. Try to relax."
She couldn't relax. Each time she closed her eyes, she slipped into the swimming pool again, flashing cameras and cackling laughter. She whimpered into another sob. The places where she had scratched herself itched and burned under the water. With a washcloth, Lana sponged the small wounds. "It's okay, Mary Eunice. You're okay. I'm going to take care of you. Let me wash your hair." She gathered Mary Eunice's long hair and ran it through her fingers. Why is she so tender? Why did God make her so perfect?

"Thank you," in her hoarse, bare whisper. Her throat still ached. She leaned into Lana's gentle hand upon her cheek. You are far more than I deserve. I'm so sorry. Gentle fingernails scraped her scalp, and she bent over inadvertently, craving Lana's touch everywhere. Don't. You don't deserve it. "I'm sorry I kissed you."

To her surprise, Lana chuckled, and Mary Eunice blinked, blue eyes following the dark silhouette. "I'm not upset. You shouldn't be, either." She held Mary Eunice's hand, resting on the rim of the tub. "I said you could, remember?" Mary Eunice hummed. But what about Wendy? she wanted to ask. Is she mad at me now? Mary Eunice had never met Wendy, but she didn't want any spirit to disapprove of her, especially one Lana had loved so much. "Don't be that way." Lana toyed with her fingers, bent each one forward and backward. "Don't start hating yourself. You're too good for that. There's nothing wrong with what you did, I promise." The smile tinged into her voice so Mary Eunice could almost see it in spite of the darkness. "Trust me. I've spent my whole life convincing myself of it."

Her brow furrowed. "Of what?"

"That kissing girls is no worse than kissing men."

Oh, Duh. Mary Eunice pursed her lips into a thoughtful pout while she mused on the revelation. "I—I'm not sorry because you're a woman, Lana." You're the prettiest woman I've ever known, and the strongest, and the most loving. She struggled to clear her throat and keep the words coming out clearly where they wanted to catch and stay stuck inside her. "I'm sorry because—because—" I don't really know why, other than I know your heart is Wendy's, and mine is God's, and you're my only friend, and I love you more than life itself. "I guess, because I never really did before, except that guy I puked on in high school…" Her memory of that night was hazy enough, but it had taken her months of working to pay to replace his shoes, which she would have cleaned free of charge if he hadn't pitched them. Lana laughed, more genuine; her voice was musical, better than any church choir or singer Mary Eunice had ever heard. "I guess I'm not really sorry. I'm glad it was you." She nibbled on her lower lip. The chapped skin flaked under her teeth. "Normal girls grow up kissing their friends—I just never had friends, really." She mused onward, brain alternating between the sensation of her hand in Lana's and the conversation before her. Lana didn't interrupt her; she always knew when she had more to say. "I think, being with you, this is the most normal I've ever been."

"Being sorry is your default state," Lana teased. She clasped her hand between her palms, rolled it between her fingers. She traced all the bones and veins in the back of her hand, the knuckles Aunt Celest had once cursed as masculine, the spidery shape of them. "I'm glad you think it's okay." Mary Eunice leaned her head nearer, right against the rim of the tub where she could watch the black shapes in the gray shadows, Lana cradling her wet hand like some precious, frail jewel. "Do you feel a little better now?" The dim light from the bedroom reflected in Lana's eyes, and they held steady upon Mary Eunice's face as she nodded. "Good."

"What time is it?"
Lana tucked one of the dangling, sodden strands of hair behind her ear. Having clean, combed hair felt so nice; she blinked at the sensation of Lana's fingers playing there. "It's a little after three. You were out for seven or eight hours. I didn't expect you to sleep so long."

Brow furrowing, Mary Eunice asked, "Did you eat dinner?"

"Yes, I did. Are you hungry?"

"No. My stomach kind of hurts." She grabbed the rim of the bathtub and pulled herself up when her chest rattled, but it didn't erupt into a full coughing fit. The woozy feeling swayed between her temples, and she gulped, pinching her eyes closed to keep her balance. Lana seized her by the shoulders when she wavered. "I—I'm okay. I'm just a little dizzy." The cold air of the house made her shiver when it rushed past her wet skin. "Can I get out of here?"

Lana plucked out the plug from the drain and fetched a towel. She offered a hand, which Mary Eunice took between both of hers and grasped tightly. Lana pulled her back to her rubbery legs and helped her step out of the bathtub. She gathered up the thick hair and wrung it out while Mary Eunice leaned on the wall, lips shivering. Exposure trembled through her, urged her to cover her body, but Lana's eyes didn't roam with lust—more than Mary Eunice could have promised, if their positions were switched. Lana swept her into a new nightgown, this one fresh and not drenched in her sweat, and they returned to the bed.

At Lana's behest, she drank the rest of her glass of water and nibbled on a cracker before sleepiness got the better of both of them, and she found herself immersed in Lana's embrace once again beneath the bed sheets. Lana buried her face in her neck and inhaled deeply, a hand around her middle, resting on her abdomen. The blankets swaddled them up to their chins. Mary Eunice turned her head to look at Lana. At the movement, Lana's eyes widened, and she mumbled an apology, withdrawing. "No, wait." Mary Eunice caught her hand. "Please."

Easing back around her, Lana obeyed, more slowly this time. Mary Eunice glanced at the side of her face, the curve of her lips in the darkness. It's normal for friends to kiss their friends. But she stifled the urge to kiss Lana again, poured water over those flames. Don't be silly. Once was enough. Once was too much. So, instead, she placed her hand over Lana's and curled their fingers together. Lana nuzzled into the back of her neck and her wet hair. "Sweet dreams."

"G'night." Mary Eunice sighed the words, heavy and honest. To her surprise, Lana's breath puffed unevenly across the back of her neck into sleep. She's got to be exhausted. She's done nothing but wait on me all day. "I love you." There's nothing wrong with how I love you. There's nothing wrong with it. She repeated the mantra in her mind, hailing it over and over like a prayer. The rosary laid discarded under the covers, no longer drawn into her fist; her fingers twined with Lana's, and she didn't miss it as she fell asleep.

When Mary Eunice breathed into wakefulness once more, bright afternoon sunlight streamed through the window. "Mmm…" She yawned. A dull headache throbbed between her temples, but her body didn't ache with the fury of the previous night. She rolled over. Where she expected to find Lana, Gus rested, both brown eyes fixed upon her. "Hi." Her voice was still a painful croak, and she fought to clear her throat of the phlegm coating it. His tail wagged, and he crawled across the mattress to her on his belly, tongue sponging out across her face until she giggled. "Good boy."

The telephone shrilled from deeper in the house. Mary Eunice didn't think anything of it for a moment while she scratched at Gus's ears, but when Lana's voice reached her ears, she reconsidered. "Shut up, stupid fucking thing! Fuck my life! Oh my god, I can't believe this!"
doesn't sound promising. Mary Eunice tiptoed out of the bed to the bathroom, and after she relieved herself and tidied her bed head, she followed the sound of Lana's outburst, Gus at her heels. "Where does this thing unplug?"

She regarded the living room, the morning's paper on the couch where the headline told all readers Lana Winters had spoken—turn to page five to read her moving piece about discrimination against community heroes. A frown troubled her lips, and she walked to the office, where Lana jerked at the telephone cord in a struggle to remove it from the wall. The bell rang again. Out of reflex, Mary Eunice picked it up, swinging into the spinning office chair. Lana jolted upright. "No, no, no—don't—"

"The Lord is going to smite you," accused a man from the line, shouting; she didn't even press it to her ear to hear his words clearly. "And all your faggot kind! Hero, my ass—you need to repent and cleanse yourself of your sins—I don't care what your bitchy little nun friend has to say about it—She's just a cunt with a fanny and too much to say—Speak to me, you dyke!"

Bewildered, Mary Eunice glanced back up to Lana. "Who is he?" He raged onward, fuming because she refused to answer him, until she held the phone to her ear and asked, in her sweetest polite voice, "Excuse me, sir? Is your air conditioner working?"

He sputtered. "I—you—yes—who is this? You're not the bitch who answered earlier. Who gives a fuck about my air conditioner? Are you threatening me?"

"Oh, of course not. I was just curious. You'll need it, where you're going. I hear it's really hot there." She dropped the telephone back onto the receiver before he bellowed another string of curses at her. A bright hoot of laughter lifted from Lana, her harried expression relaxing the lines of stress around her eyes and mouth. "That wasn't incredibly Christ-like of me, was it?" Lana wiped her streaming eyes with the backs of her hand, giggling where she sat in the floor, her back resting against the wood of the desk. "Who is that man?"

Lana chortled. "I have—I have no fucking clue—Who taught you that?"

"Sister Jude used to say it sometimes." The telephone bell rang again. "Should I?" Lana shook her head and lifted up the phone and dropped it back on the receiver. "Is that the same person? Why is he calling you?"

Shaking her head, the mirth dissipated from Lana's face, gazing up at the corner of the ceiling. "There are a lot of assholes out there. My name's in the telephone directory. It rang all morning—they gave me a lunch break, and I thought it was over, but suddenly they're back." Her fingers plucked at the frayed edges of her sleeves. "People aren't very happy about the piece I submitted for today's paper—about what happened in the restaurant." Mary Eunice hopped out of the chair and flopped beside Lana onto the floor. The carpet muffled the sound of her thud. "Your middle name isn't Grace," Lana remarked, dry.

What? "No, it's Eunice. You know that." Lana glanced at her out of the corner of her eye, and then the joke donned on her, making her blush. "Oh. Right." She averted her eyes, nudging her hand against Lana's, an open invitation. Lana wound her arm through Mary Eunice's and rested her cheek upon her shoulder. "You don't deserve to be treated this way." She sniffled a few times. With her free hand, she wiped her leaking nose. "You didn't go through everything you've been through to be treated like garbage."

"I know." Lana sighed, eyes closed. Her chin trembled. She's going to cry. Oh, no, please don't cry. "I didn't talk to any of them. I know what they have to say. I've heard it already." Mary Eunice wanted to swaddle her in a tight hug and never release her until all of her broken pieces stuck back together again. She's got so many broken pieces. Lana's voice dropped to a broken
whisper, shaking her head where it pressed into the soft of Mary Eunice's shoulder. "The world is never going to change. It's going to be this way forever. I shouldn't try to fight it. We came here to try to be safer, but—it was foolish. It was all foolish."

"You can't think like that," Mary Eunice begged. Lana hid her face, her tears falling into the sleeve of her heavy nightgown. "One day, things will be better. Not tomorrow, or next year, but one day, you'll be able to go somewhere with a woman you love, and nobody will throw you out, or hit you, or curse at you—I believe so."

"You believe a lot of things."

The baleful tone of Lana's voice stung. "Yeah," Mary Eunice murmured, a musing word as she looked down at the ground where their legs stretched out in front of them. "I do."

Brown eyes moved to Mary Eunice's cheek; they carved holes there. "I hope it's all true. All of it." She squeezed her hand tight, palm to palm, fingers filling all the gaps. Mary Eunice turned her head and pressed a delicate kiss to Lana's temple. *I do too. I want you to be happy one day. I want you to walk down the street with your wife, and I want her to love you as much as I do. You deserve it. How do you feel?* Lana's question tugged her out of her reverie.

"I'm okay," Mary Eunice ran her thumb over the side of the bumpy joint of Lana's index finger. Lana allowed her head to droop back onto Mary Eunice's shoulder at the affirmation. "Are you okay?" The line of Lana's lips quivered. *Oh, no.* "What's the matter?"

"I'm f-fine."

Mary Eunice severed their clasped hands and shifted, wrapping her arms around Lana's middle. "That's a lie if I ever heard one." Lana muffled her mouth with the palm of her hand. A sob wracked through her chest, and she curled into the embrace, allowing Mary Eunice to drag her into her lap like a floppy ragdoll. "Is this about the mean people on the phone?" Lana shook her head and plunged her sticky face into the crook of Mary Eunice's neck. "I'm sorry. Tell me when you can." Mary Eunice sneezed, but she managed to catch it before she spewed into Lana's chocolate hair. "Sorry," she whispered. Lana paid no heed.

Once her tears calmed, Lana wiped her eyes, fighting to compose herself. *Don't put on that face for me. I know you're hurting. You don't have to be strong all the time.* "I'm sorry," Lana said. "I'm fine—"

She attempted to withdraw from the embrace, but Mary Eunice held fast. "Lana," she implored. "Tell me. You're upset. What's the matter?" Lana's muscles tensed in the grip, breath catching in her throat. "Please."

The final word made her resolve crumble. A thin, hot breath fluttered from between her parted lips, and she placed her hands on top of Mary Eunice's. Lana's body had regained its innate warmth, the largest sign that Mary Eunice's fever had vanished. "I—I just had a dream. About Wendy."

"It's not silly." Mary Eunice glanced down where Lana clutched her hand so tightly, her knuckles whitened. "There's nothing silly about it. Silly is dreaming of monstrous flying teacups that eat children."

"It's not silly." Mary Eunice glanced down where Lana clutched her hand so tightly, her knuckles whitened. "There's nothing silly about it. Silly is dreaming of monstrous flying teacups that eat children."

Lana snorted, a mingled hiccup and chuckle. She leaned back against Mary Eunice, her head tilting back to rest upon her shoulder. "You're right. It's not silly." She gazed upward at the ceiling. Her brown eyes swam with tears, but they didn't fall. "I miss her so much." She closed her eyes and inhaled through her nose, which rattled. "This would be so much easier if she were here.
—I keep thinking that I could have saved her—I know I couldn't have, but I wish—oh, I wish things were different. "I know. So do I. "I wish it were me instead."

Don't say that. Mary Eunice's arms tightened inadvertently where they held Lana, fearing she would vanish where she sat. "Would you really want her to be where you are now?"

"God, no, I'm fucking miserable." Lana shook her head. "Wherever Wendy is, she's gotta be a metric fuck-ton happier than I am. She's probably teaching science to—to Anne Frank and Emmett Till and those little girls from that Birmingham church." She turned her face to Mary Eunice's when another kiss met the top of her head, the only consolation Mary Eunice knew how to offer. "Sometimes I think you're the only good thing left on this earth."

Lana lifted a hand to brush away the single tear sliding down her cheek, and Mary Eunice giggled at the tender touch of her fingertips. "I think the same thing about you."

Lana smiled, sad in all of the haunted shadows in and under her eyes. "We're a mess, aren't we?" Mary Eunice hummed, noncommittal, until the phone rang again. "Oh, fuck me." Lana crawled out of her lap and picked up, slammed it down, and then left it off the hook. She flopped into the office chair. "I hate people. I'm going to get rich off of this book and then buy myself a private island. No one but me and the stupid dog."

"What am I? Chopped liver?" Mary Eunice grinned up at Lana where she spun about in the chair.

"You can come, too." Lana leaned down to take her hands and pulled her to her feet. Mary Eunice staggered. Her belly gargled aloud, sending a blush up her neck. "You didn't eat all day yesterday. You should be hungry." Lana stood and pressed a hand to Mary Eunice's forehead. "You still feel kind of warm. Let me take your temperature."

Mary Eunice sat on the couch beside the paper, resisting the urge to turn to the letter and read what Lana had written, what had inflamed the community enough to spring their rage upon their home. Don't. You don't want to invade her privacy. The privacy that she sent to the entire city of Boston via newspaper. It's not your business. Her dry cough manifested in her throat, and she bent over to try and chase it away. It ached and burned, her throat smarting from overusing her voice in her words and whimpers from the previous night. The bath remained a vague memory, tinged with gray. She remembered how cold Lana's hands had felt, the pain sent shivering through her with every touch. I never want to feel that way again.

Returning with the thermometer in her grip, Lana shook it and popped it into Mary Eunice's mouth. She sought out the clock, which read two in the afternoon. I didn't just fall asleep. I hibernated. She averted her eyes while Lana watched the clock, watched the second hand tick with its periodic clicks, then the minute hand. When it had budged three times, she took the thermometer back. "You're still running a little bit—you're at 100.5." Mary Eunice sneezed. "Bless you." To her great fortune, Lana proffered a handkerchief, and she took it and blew and wiped her nose. "Do you want me to call Father Joseph and tell him you won't be there tomorrow?"

"No—I have to go. He might think something bad happened to me."

"Something bad did happen to you. You didn't get your flu shot, and you're suffering for it." That wasn't the type of bad thing I meant. Mary Eunice made a pout with her lips while she considered a way to explain it to Lana; nothing looked as suspicious as a formerly possessed person abruptly skipping church and playing it off as illness. "I won't stop you, if you want to go. But I don't want you to get sicker again. I thought you were going to melt last night. Your skin felt like a furnace."

"But I'm okay now," Mary Eunice insisted. She sniffled into her handkerchief. "Mostly."
A wry snicker rose from Lana's smiling face. "I knew things were bad when you stopped lying to me, telling me you were okay." She rose from the sofa. "Stay. I'm going to make you a sandwich." Mary Eunice prepared an objection, but Lana cut her off. "No. No cooking or cleaning for you today. You can sit there and watch TV, alright? This house went uncleaned for months. A few days' clutter won't hurt it."

Unwilling to challenge Lana, Mary Eunice quieted, propped up on the arm of the couch while Lana went into the kitchen. Gus whined and lay at her feet, his chin resting on top of the toes where her nail polish had begun to chip. He had emptied his kibble bowl, and his big eyes pled for any sign of pity, so when Lana returned with a bologna sandwich, she picked off some corner pieces for him. He gulped the treats whole, and Mary Eunice giggled at his antics. "Good puppy. Okay—sit." She dangled a scrap of bologna over his nose. Instead of sitting on his haunches, he sprang onto his hind legs and slurped it from between her fingers. "Oh, goodness."

"You're going to spoil him. He already thinks he belongs in bed with us. By next week, he'll be eating at the kitchen table with a napkin in his lap like a gentleman."

"He is a gentleman." Those round brown eyes lingered on Mary Eunice, pleading for another smidgen of food. "Lana said no," she reported to him. "Sorry. I've been overruled. Wait until dinnertime." He licked his lips, gazing at the sliced sandwich in her lap. Mary Eunice nibbled at the corner; Lana had peeled off the crust the way she liked.

The fond, cheerful expression upon Lana's face had a wistful taint. "I have to start writing my column for Thursday. Stay put."

Mary Eunice inclined her eyebrows and muttered, "Yes, mother," behind her sandwich, which earned a glare but not a rebuke from Lana. Lana vanished into the office, door open, so Mary Eunice could hear her fingers clicking the keys of the typewriter. In her absence, Mary Eunice finished the sandwich (she slipped a few more pieces to Gus) and sipped the glass of water. I should pray. She hadn't brought her rosary with her, and she feared Lana's criticism if she rose from the couch, so she pictured the string of beads in her mind while she knelt in front of the couch, hands clasped. Gus bumped against her, and she shushed him.

Afternoon bled into evening; Mary Eunice had enough time, staring at the wall or the television with disinterest, to pray four rosaries, which was more than she had prayed at any given time in months. She also became well-acquainted with boredom and her own wandering thoughts, fragmented when she curled up on the couch and gazed up at the ceiling. The plaster pieces made shapes after awhile, like stargazing and finding constellations in the white freckles and dots. Lana typed for four hours before she emerged, cross-eyed from staring at the keyboard for so long. Mary Eunice sat up to greet her. "This is the most boredom I have ever experienced before in my life. I think I'm getting brain fever. I might die if you don't let me cook you dinner."

"Nice try. Watch The Twilight Zone."

"I can't; it's too scary." Lana laughed aloud at her, and she blushed, realizing how childish she sounded. "The narrator is scary. He has a weird mouth. And weird eyes. And the theme song is scary." She picked at the sleeve of her nightgown, out of which she hadn't changed since she rose. "Can I at least help you, please?"

Lana felt her forehead. "I don't know. You still feel warm to me. You look peaky."
A frown touched her lips, quirking them, and Mary Eunice's eyes followed the movement carefully. Maybe I really do have brain fever. "Couldn't you pray until I get dinner ready?"

"I've been praying for almost four hours. My prayer list has run out."
"Just sit tight, okay?" *I'm never going to win.* Lana had the willpower of a bull. Mary Eunice conceded defeat by tucking herself beneath the throw on the couch. Lana's frown dissipated into another tiny smile, a bare inclination of her lips, but they allured Mary Eunice nonetheless. "Thank you."

They ate dinner, and they retired early after their showers. Lana read a novel with the label *Great Expectations* on the spine while Mary Eunice bundled herself under the covers, both big eyes fixed on Lana, the lamplight in her hair and eyes. Lana tucked a string of hair behind her ear and licked her thumb to turn a page. Her lips moved over one another in silent slides, buffering against the words. Her chocolate eyes glowed in the yellow light, reflecting the words. But then she halted and turned her head to regard Mary Eunice. "You okay?"

Mary Eunice nodded. "I'm just watching you."

Lana stretched out, reclining on the pillows, and opened her arm for Mary Eunice to snuggle beside her. Mary Eunice settled her head on the flat of Lana's chest. *Her heartbeat is going faster.* Lana perched the book on her stomach and turned the page, and Mary Eunice's eyes flicked to read the typed words. "This used to be one of my favorite books."

*Used to be?* "What's it about?" Mary Eunice asked instead.

"It's about a young, impoverished orphan who becomes infatuated with a wealthy girl as a child and spends most of his life trying and failing to woo her." Lana's voice echoed, deep and earthy, from inside her chest; it vibrated against her cheek, lulling alongside the rise-fall of her breaths. "But it's really about all manner of things. Class and society, love and friendship, innocence and deceit."

The prickling sensation crawled over Mary Eunice's scalp, familiar by now as Lana toyed with her hair and scratched with her short, jagged fingernails. "It sounds interesting." She battled to keep her eyes open. The rhythm of Lana's breath and heartbeat created a lullaby. "I used to read a lot… Fairy tales, mostly. Carol and Patricia loved it when I would read to them. *Alice in Wonderland* was their favorite."

"What was your favorite?"

Mary Eunice hummed, thoughtful. "Then, I liked *Black Beauty* the best, I think."

Lana's dimples emerged when she smiled. *She's smiling a lot. I love to see her smile. She deserves to smile all the time.* The tender expression made Mary Eunice's own bloom upon her face. "But you don't like horses."

"It's different when they're fictional horses." She sniffled through her stuffy nose. "But, the older I get, the more I appreciate 'The Velveteen Rabbit'. It was James's favorite." Lana tucked her bookmark into the book and dropped it onto the nightstand, but she didn't reach to kill the lamplight yet. "He made me read it so many times, I never thought I would be able to like it. But—it makes more sense, now."

Her eyelids drooped as Lana's fingers combed through her damp hair. She only remembered some of the words now; years ago, she had memorized them so she could tell James the story in complete darkness without disturbing the rest of the house. "You become. It takes a long time. By the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and you get loose in the joints. But it doesn't matter, because once you're real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." She lifted her arm from beneath the covers and reached around Lana's abdomen to hug her. The sheer nightgown clung to her body; the indent of her belly button met her palm. "I'm still becoming, I think."
"Me too." Lana exhaled through her parted lips; her breath teased Mary Eunice's hair. She reached to turn off the lamp, and they lay in the dark, Gus at the foot of the bed. "I've got plenty of books," she said, like an afterthought, "if you want to start reading again. We never found a bookshelf—or a place to put one—so we kept throwing them into the big box in the floor of the closet."

"I'd like that. Father Joseph keeps telling me to get a hobby."

Lana chuckled. "It's bad when even your priest thinks you're boring."

Mary Eunice nuzzled her face right into the crook of her neck. "Yeah. I guess it is." Lana kissed the crown of her head, but Mary Eunice withdrew when she felt Lana begin to settle. "Wait. Don't. You sleep best on your tummy." Lana flipped over onto her stomach, and Mary Eunice pressed near to her again, arm looped over the small of her back. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, sunshine." A warm blush flushed over Mary Eunice's cheeks. I want to be your sunshine forever. Her heart blossomed like a healthy flower planted in soft, moist soil, and she rested the side of her head on Lana's pillow. In the darkness, the last evening light fading through the window, she could just make out the shape of Lana's lips. I wish I could kiss you again. She fought to quiet that voice, the one that wanted to give all of herself to Lana. I would do anything to make you feel okay again.

…

Wringing her hands in her lap, Mary Eunice perched in one the oversized chair across from Father Joseph where he flipped through his notebook. "It's good to see you again, Sister," he greeted as he adjusted his glasses. The office smelled like pipe tobacco, making her sniffle and cough into her handkerchief. The single stained glass window cast an image of Jesus upon the carpeted floor. "Are you well?"

She dabbed her runny nose. "Oh—yes!" Is it that obvious? She cleared her throat, trying to cleanse her voice of the raw, coarse texture poisoning it. It still ached, but swallowing didn't hurt as much as it had before, and she had managed to eat breakfast—though Lana insisted on cooking it herself. "I was under the weather for a few days, but I feel much better now." Her runny nose was annoying, but she would take that over the awful headaches and terrible fevers any day.

Father Joseph's kind eyes crinkled around the edges with his smile. "I'm glad to hear it." He used his pen across the journal in his lap, drawing at the pages. "I was quite surprised to see you appear in the paper—first Friday morning, and then again, yesterday, in Lana's letter." Heat flushed to her face. Is he going to scold me? She worried her lower lip with her teeth. "What happened on Saturday must have been traumatic for the both of you. How are you coping?"

"Oh, uh, er—" You could start by using a complete sentence. "I hadn't given it much thought, actually," she admitted, tugging at the sleeve of her habit. "It was frightening, but Lana was distressed enough—angry enough—for the both of us."

He hummed in response, noncommittal, and Mary Eunice wondered if she had said something wrong. As he scribbled in the journal, he asked, "Why didn't you tell the man of your position in the church?"

Anxiety quelled in her stomach. Mary Eunice wanted to pick at her arm. "I—I didn't really have a chance. It all happened very suddenly. My skirt was caught, and when Lana tried to help, he jumped on her—I told him to leave her alone, so he grabbed me instead…" The memory of the awful dream she had had hazed in front of her, the manager's blood running all over her hands as she hacked away at his body with a steak knife. "When he let me go, we ran."
Sipping at his mug of coffee, Father Joseph peered up at her over his glasses. "I respect your loyalty to Lana. I'm certain she appreciates it as well. She's in a very compromising position, and she has more enemies than allies." He cleared his throat. "You give her more even footing against the naysayers. In spite of her affliction, she still is a community hero. People seem to have forgotten that before they even thanked her for her services."

_Lana isn't afflicted._ Mary Eunice held her tongue. The paper of the journal crinkled beneath his pen strokes. "Father," she addressed, meek, until he arched an eyebrow at her. "There were some people at church on Sunday who were unkind to Lana—the priest there assured us we were welcome, but it troubles me that she can't feel safe even where we worship."

"Does it bother her, or is just your concern?" Mary Eunice shrugged, uncertain; they hadn't spoken of it since she had come home so ill. "It's my suspicion that Lana has felt unsafe for much of her life. The world is a dangerous place for someone like her. Don't worry yourself over it." He grinned at her, yellowed and gappy teeth a reassurance to Mary Eunice in spite of her nerves wriggling in her abdomen. "She thinks the world of you—did you read her piece?" Mary Eunice shook her head. "She does. It is brave of you to support her so ardently."

Blue eyes moving down to her Mary Janes, Mary Eunice couldn't help the tiny, sad smile troubling her lips. "Lana was there for me in a time when I had no one else. It's only right of me to support her. She deserves more than the community is willing to offer her." Her fingers stilled from plucking at her sleeves to wring in one another once again. "She got the most awful phone calls yesterday, after the paper was delivered. Finally, we had to take it off the hook."

"People are cruel." Father Joseph wrote a bit longer in the journal. "I'm sure you're not accustomed to all of the attention. But how are you doing, otherwise?"

_Right. We're not here to talk about Lana._ Mary Eunice had enough concerns about Lana to fill the hour and more, but Father Joseph was appointed to help her recover from possession, not sort out her personal problems with her roommate. "I—I'm not certain, Father." He gazed at her, even and welcoming, an invitation to continue speaking.

"When I first woke up at Lana's home, I felt so—empty. I felt like there wasn't any of me left, and I was just a hollow shell without a soul." She plucked her rosary from the pocket of her habit and fingered it. "I don't feel that way anymore. I feel—maybe not happy—" Mary Eunice couldn't remember the last time she was genuinely happy. It had been a very, very long time ago. _Lana is the closest to happiness I've been since I was a child._

"I feel okay, most of the time. I keep busy. Lana makes good company. She's funny. It's easy to talk to her." _You're talking about Lana again._ "But I'm struggling. I pray—I pray all the time, more often than I used to. It doesn't feel the same." _Don't start crying on the man, you fool._ Her voice quivered nonetheless, and she balled her handkerchief up in her hand. "I know it's just me—nothing has changed—but it hurts. It makes me feel abandoned."

"It isn't just you, Sister." Father Joseph held steady while she dabbed at her wet eyes with the corner of her handkerchief. "It's very common. It's residual. You are not alone." The rim of his glasses gleamed. "And you haven't been abandoned. I know that's how you feel. God also knows. This is a healing process. You must keep your faith." She nodded in agreement. "You're doing very well. I hope you know that. It won't all come back at once. But one day, many years from now, you'll look back on this and you'll realize how far you've come because of it." _That feels so far away._ "Is there anything else that's troubling you? How are your dreams?"

Mary Eunice toyed with her rosary, wrapping it around her hand. "They're awful." She exhaled the words, a heavy sigh more than a speech. "When I was ill—my fever got terribly high—I had trouble telling what was real and what wasn't. I saw things, horrible things..." She licked her lips
and swallowed hard. Her saliva had thickened in the back of her mouth. "Bloody Face, he was there. He kept telling me he was going to hurt Lana. And there was Sister Jude, with her cane, and the Monsignor, and Dr. Arden." The rosary tugged so tight around her finger, the tip began to turn purple. "There were these spiders that crawled all over me, and Clara—" She paused to dab her eyes again. "Clara was there."

A frown marred the priest's lips as he regarded her. "That sounds frightening. Were you alone?"

Her eyes widened. "No—No, of course not. Lana was with me all the while. She stayed and took care of me—I asked her not to, but she wouldn't accept it. She didn't leave my side." She held me through my fear and let me kiss her and cuddled with me and gave me a bath. Mary Eunice didn't want to tell him all of that; it was private, things held between her and Lana. "She comforted me. I might have lost my mind without her."

"I take it that your loyalty is reciprocal, then." Mary Eunice nodded. "That's good. One of the symptoms of recovery is a feeling of isolation." He sipped at his coffee while he mused at her. "Now, one person hardly qualifies as a support system, but someone is better than no one. Because of the private nature of an exorcism, many patients are afraid to tell their friends and family of what happened to them."

"Now, one person hardly qualifies as a support system, but someone is better than no one.
Because of the private nature of an exorcism, many patients are afraid to tell their friends and family of what happened to them." His pen continued to loop over the pages of the journal in long strokes; he had feminine handwriting, though Mary Eunice couldn't discern the words. "Have you looked into finding something you enjoy, like we've been discussing?"

"Um—Lana said I'm free to read any of her books. She has oodles of them."

"Are you a reader?"

"I used to be."

Father Joseph nodded, slow and contemplative. "My mother always said a good book is the only thing you can buy that makes you richer." He glanced up at her, the rims of his glasses flashing in the dim light through the stained glass window. "What else did you like to do, when you were younger?"

"Um. Mary Eunice bit back the urge to stumble and stammer over her words some more. "I used to knit and sew a lot." She had always found the knitting more enjoyable than the sewing. Her sewing talents only came in handy when Aunt Celest met someone who tore her clothing, or she had to hem old, threadbare pants to pass down to yet another child, or someone played too rough on the playground and they didn't have the money to buy anything new; but the knitting allowed her to express herself in any color yarn she could find, and she took deep satisfaction in wrapping up all four of her minions in her handmade scarves, hats, gloves, and sweaters.

"I think you'd do well to try and rediscover those things, Sister. You're doing very well. You need something to occupy your time." Mary Eunice dabbed her nose with her handkerchief, bobbing her head in agreement while she mulled over his words. Did she really need a hobby so badly? She hardly ever felt bored with Lana, and she always managed to find something to clean around the house; now, with Gus, she had a guarantee of a mess following him wherever he walked. "Self-expression and self-validation are both crucial at this stage. You must remember who you are and respect and love her. The rest will come with time." He thinks so. But she couldn't ask Lana to buy her needles and yarn. You're lucky she feeds you—you sleep in her bed at night. She's given you more than you deserve. "Is there anything else concerning you?"

Mary Eunice bit the tip of her tongue. I had a dream where I severed a man's penis and testicles with a steak knife. She restrained the revealing words, uncertain how to frame them in an appropriate way. It wasn't a nightmare. I enjoyed it. She toyed with her rosary, cleansing her spirit with the touch of the sacred beads; a soft sigh fluttered from between her parted lips. "No, I don't
think so."

With unnecessary flourish, Father Joseph signed out of the journal and snapped it closed. "Very well. I'll see you next week, Sister. If you need anything, my door is always open."

"Thank you, Father." Mary Eunice showed herself out of the office and headed through the sanctuary on the crimson-colored carpet, muffling the sounds of her shoes. A woman knelt at one of the pews with her hands clasped; Mary Eunice tiptoed past her to the exit, where she peaked out one of the stained glass windows to see Lana's car in the parking lot. It hadn't moved. Did she even leave, or did she just wait in the car the whole time?

Dry leaves rattled across the pavement as she approached the car, the breeze chilling her in spite of the sun. Lana glanced up at her; she wore a pair of reading glasses as she lifted her head to Mary Eunice, brunette hair falling into her eyes. Those glasses look good on her. They make her eyes look bigger. She has such pretty brown eyes. Lana unlocked the car door, and Mary Eunice slipped inside; she closed the book in her lap and removed the glasses. "How was it?"

She shrugged. "It was okay."

"Did he read the paper?"

"Yes."

"Is he angry?"

Mary Eunice quirked her eyebrows. "Why would he be angry?" It was Lana's turn to shrug, but the anxiety lining her face refused to ease, even as she had no explanation for her concerns. "No, he's not. He's glad that we have each other." She removed her veil and coif and tugged her long hair free. In the side mirror, she glanced at her reflection, eyes red-rimmed from crying but otherwise in good order, at least for someone who had spent the previous days groveling about in agony.

With a hum, Lana scanned her. "Are you okay?" Her voice dropped to a murmur, caring and genuine. "You look like you were crying."

"I was, but I'm fine." Under Lana's skeptical look, Mary Eunice pushed a smile onto her lips. Her eyes crinkled at the corners. It wasn't hard to smile at Lana. "Really. We talked through it." I wish you would see someone and talk through it with them. "He helps a lot."

Lana nodded in allowance. "I'm glad."

They drove home, and Mary Eunice removed her habit and tucked it back into the closet where it would wait for the next week to roll around when she saw Father Joseph again; Lana let Gus outside and refilled his kibble bowl. Mary Eunice changed into some comfortable pants and a sweater, keeping her socks, and took the vacuum out of the hall closet.

The instant the motor cranked to life, sucking up all the extra dog hair, Lana appeared. "What are you doing?"

"Uh—" Vacuuming? Mary Eunice killed the motor and held the handle, feeling like a naughty child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Sheepish, she managed a weak grin where she met Lana's eyes. "I'm clearly devising a strategy to keep the US safe from the Soviet Union. Can't you tell?"

The soft, sarcastic remark broke Lana's stern facade, her lips easing over her teeth into a smile. Her dimples deepened in her cheeks. "I think you should rest. You're still sick. I don't want your
fever to go back up."

Mary Eunice wiped her nose with her handkerchief. "I'm fine," she insisted. "I rested all day yesterday—I didn't even get up until two." A rogue hand adhered itself to her forehead, roamed to her cheeks, and then planted back on her forehead. "Lana, please!"

The hand flitted away. "Right, I'm sorry." But her brown eyes still held Mary Eunice's, unconvinced of her health. Mary Eunice took her hand and squeezed it. "But, um, actually—" A stroke of brilliance teased Lana's face, and her expression spread into a smile. "You could really help me by cleaning out the bottom of the closet. There's an accumulation of crap down there that hasn't been sorted since we moved in."

**What?** It took Mary Eunice a moment to work through it; as much as she had stepped up to help with household chores since moving in, Lana had never before assigned her a task. She didn't _mind_, of course—she would do anything Lana asked—but it caught her off-guard. "Sure, I can do that. What do you want me to do?"

"Just make a pile of things to throw out, things to donate, and things to keep. Use your best judgment." Lana slipped her hand over Mary Eunice's on the handle of the vacuum cleaner and unplugged it from the wall, marching it back to the hall closet where she had gotten it. Mary Eunice folded herself onto her knees with the closet door open wide, the light on and dangling above. _This is going to be a pretty big job._ She swept the floor with a surveying glance. "Thank you."

Mary Eunice looked back up at Lana, beaming. "It's no problem. This will keep me busy." Something tinged Lana's face—relief?—before it vanished, and she nodded. The assortment of things surrounded Mary Eunice like an ocean. She started on the shoes, seeking pairs, and Lana said something about writing for awhile and left. Mary Eunice played through the mess.

For the most part, the work was easy, if tedious. Many soiled garments, ruined with bleach stains and stretched beyond recognition, had been tossed there. Several pairs of shoes were too or three sizes too small, so she put those in a donation pile. Then, she discovered the box of books Lana had mentioned the previous night, a plastic tub almost overflowing and filled with dust. When she tugged it out from the shadows, a spider darted out at her; she flattened it with one of the donated shoes. She regarded the tub for a long, yearning moment, as the urge rose in her to comb her fingers over all of the covers, to read the titles and the summaries of the pieces Lana had collected and cherished and loved. _Don't. Focus._

Reluctant, she pushed the tub away, considering it the beginning of the _keep_ pile alongside the shoes that would fit her or Lana. In the back of the closet, college textbooks were haphazardly tossed about, mingling with notebooks, many of which had torn covers and tattered pages. She left those in the middle, uncertain how much Lana cherished her university notes; she only threw away the loose pages which were untraceable to any particular subject.

A dusty, leather-bound book caught her eye; it bore no title on the cover or the spine. Intrigued, Mary Eunice picked it up and blew the dust from the cover. The pages had stained an off-yellow with age, and she turned to a place about a quarter of the way into it. To her surprise, loopy script handwriting met her eyes, much more feminine and neater than Lana's boxy, chicken scratch print. At the top of the page, the author had written, "September 17, 1949." _I was twelve years old._

Feeling terribly like a peeping tom, Mary Eunice's eyes wandered down the page. "I can't believe anything that happened tonight. I don't even want to take the time to write about it, but I want to remember it forever. Lana and I just made love for the first time." _This is Wendy's journal._ A horrified pang shivered through her, and she licked her lips, but morbid curiosity drove her deeper into the paragraph. "She's sleeping beside me now. God, she's everything I've ever wanted. I've
dreamed of her like this since that day by the creek last summer. She tasted like strawberries, then."

*I shouldn't be reading this.* "Tonight, it was different. I was staying out of the way. I came up the hall to get some snacks from the kitchen, and they were on the couch, and Victor just grabbed her and kissed her." The ink became blotted here, laid more forcefully upon the page. "It was so uncomfortable. I just stood there and stared at them. I felt sick to my stomach. I know it was wrong for me to be jealous, but fuck, I was so fucking jealous. How dare he do that to her. How dare he kiss her lips without her permission. How dare he taste her when I couldn't have her."

Mary Eunice licked her lips and delved into the text, unable to withstand herself. "She jerked away like he'd burnt her. I would've thought it was funny, if I wasn't so goddamn angry about the whole thing. She stood up and she told him to get out. He asked what was wrong, and she said they were done. She said she didn't love him and she didn't want to kiss him and she wanted him to take his things and leave."

"Really, he was good about the whole thing. He took his backpack and apologized, and he left. Lana locked the door behind him. She turned to look at me, and she said, 'I'm sorry. Men are really gross.' I said, 'It took you long enough to figure that one out.' She snapped at me about being a scientist and always being right, and I went on to the kitchen. I wasn't going to bother her, but she followed me and apologized again, and she put her arms around her neck. It was like all the earth's gravity disappeared, which I know is impossible but that's what it felt like, and I was floating away into her eyes. She has the most beautiful eyes. They're so dark, sometimes you can't see where the pupil ends and the iris begins, but in the right light, they become like molten amber."

Swallowing hard, Mary Eunice found her heart skipping twice its regular pace. She rooted for Wendy like the central character of a romance novel. She wanted Wendy to get the girl. *She will. Just give her a chance.* "She kissed me. It wasn't like our kiss before. It was so. Fucking. Hot. She just hurled herself at me. Her lips are so soft and wet, they're like overripe watermelon, their texture and their taste. I almost forgot to breathe, but when I remembered, I could smell her perfume all over me, right on top of me. She opened her mouth, and I got to taste her. Her teeth are perfect. She's so perfect."

"At some point, she broke it. She had me by the hair, I had backed her up against the counter and ground against her like some kind of maniac—god, I was so wet for her. I was dripping into my panties and so was she and we both knew it." *Wet,* Mary Eunice considered. She recalled the flush heat between her legs when she had had the dream about Lana in the garden of Eden. Was that the feeling Wendy described? *Don't be stupid.*

Her mouth had dried with the influence of the piece, so she found her tongue darting over her lips again, more hesitant when she continued reading this time. "She dragged me to my bedroom. Her lipstick was smeared off the corner of her lips. I could hear her breathing, panting, between her teeth, sizzling and hissing at me. She was so hot. I kissed her again, and she took off my shirt—that was when I realized what we were doing, what we were going to do. She didn't pause to give me a chance to consider. She was undressing in front of me, and it wasn't even like the strip teases at Pat Joe's. It was real. It wasn't a tease. I still can't believe she really wants me, after all this time, after all this longing. I've been in love with her as long as I can remember. I don't know how I got so lucky."

"Her fingers tangled in my bra and stripped it off. Her lips were all over me, on my neck, sucking and biting—I've got hickeys everywhere. I fumbled with the clasp on her bra and freed her tits. She has perfect tits, big pink nipples, freckles smattered across them like sprinkles on a cupcake. It was a battle, then. We couldn't decide who got to be on top. She let me win, eventually. I think
she was scared, not that she would have admitted it to me or to anyone, but it was her first time, and I don't think she knew what to expect. When I sucked on her left breast, I could feel her heartbeat underneath it on my lips and tongue. It was a frenzy. It was a firing squad."

Mary Eunice's own heart had become a thunderous stampede of racehorses galloping around a track, pounding toward the finish line. She wiped her sweat-beaded brow with the back of her hand and pressed her back against the wall for support. Just close the book. Lana doesn't ever have to know you read it. We can pretend it didn't happen. All logic commanded her to close the journal and respect Wendy's privacy in death. Would you want some stranger looking through your journal after you're dead? The mortification melted across her face at the prospect. But it didn't stop her from pressing onward.

"I grazed down her stomach with my teeth. Her face had begun to turn red. I guess she was embarrassed. I can't fathom why. I kissed all of her lumps and her stretch marks. She has the most beautiful stretch marks, from when she was fat in junior high. They're dark and long like tiger stripes. Her skin is so perfect. She tasted like sweat all over, especially between her thighs. Her hands were in my hair, all bunched up. It hurt, but it felt so good when she moaned my name.

"I planted my face right into her bush like a seed burrowing into her soil. That kinky, coarse hair scraped my lips and cheeks. It smelled like freshly cooked fish, salty and astringent and acidic. She was all kinds of tense, I could feel it in her thigh muscles, the way her legs clamped together around my head out of reflex. I told her that she smelled good. 'Do you want me to do this?' I asked. Her breathy voice, a moan, she said, 'Please, Wendy, please.' I couldn't resist, then, the urge to taste her.

"I licked up one fleshy lip, and Lana collapsed into the pillows. I had never heard her make such wonderful noises before, and I can't believe it, now, that I did that to her. Her clit was so swollen." Mary Eunice paused at the unfamiliar word, clit, and stared, tilting her head; her face flushed with color when she realized she could never ask Lana what it meant. She shuffled her legs, pressing her thighs tight together and wriggling in discomfort from the flush there. The prospect of someone licking her genitals made her squirm like a child in itchy clothing. "I'd never seen someone so wet before, so wet because of me. She was begging me to please her, to fuck her, to make love to her, as if she needed to beg.

"Her wetness made strings dangling off of my tongue. She tasted acrid, sort of sour, but not like a pickle. Her pussy tasted like a trout sprinkled with lemon juice and pepper. It was so clean and fresh." Mary Eunice squeaked to herself when she read that line, unable to restrain the overwhelmed, nervous teenage giggle bubbling to her lips. A huge part of her had never outgrown the twelve-year-old phase of cringing and blushing at the mere mention of sex, and yet here she sat, reading about the very encounter where her best friend lost her virginity. Does it count if it's with a woman?

Oh, don't be stupid. Of course it counts. I think. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and, without much consideration, continued reading. "She didn't need any encouragement or much stimulation. Her voice was so loud. I know the upstairs neighbors heard. I hope they think she was with Victor. But she said my name. My name sounds so sweet on her lips. She screamed it when she came. Her whole body tensed, her tummy tightening, her thighs. She curled up with her fists in my hair, her back coming off the bed, and she groaned and screamed somehow at the same time. I've never heard her make that noise before. It was spectacular. She is spectacular.

"She didn't stay down long. She was panting, probably caught up somewhere in the afterglow, but she wasn't lying around to be my pillow princess. She grabbed me and flipped me over. Sweat rolled off of her, glistening between her breasts. I wanted her so badly. She pinned me onto the mattress with one hand on my chest, and she loomed over me, straddling me, her knees digging
into my waist. Arousal danced on her face with her streaked lipstick. Her wet pussy left slick marks on my stomach. She slid down my neck with her tongue and teeth. I've got hickeys all over my neck and tits.

"She sucked on me until my nipples were raw and my pussy was throbbing. Everything was on fire. My clit had never felt so tormented before. I never imagined how beautiful Lana could look, balanced on top of me, naked and flushed and so goddamn sexy." Mary Eunice squirmed where she sat in the floor. Her sweaty hands smeared the ink on the pages, and slickness gathered between her thighs, uncomfortable where they chafed against one another. The image floated to her mind, Lana perched on top of her in the full nude, breasts and abdomen exposed. Her fingers would trace the freckles and stretch marks, the beautiful places Wendy described on Lana's person in her journal. The way she would touch Lana's body, reverent—Stop. You're disgusting. Lana loves Wendy. She swallowed the budding lump in her throat.

"I expected her to be hesitant, but she wasn't. She spread my legs with a palm on either thigh and dove right in. When her tongue first touched my clit, I almost wept. It felt so good. I was so hyper and sensitive, I couldn't keep my ass still; I kept bouncing off of the mattress into her mouth. I had to bite my tongue to keep from screaming. It didn't take long for her to bring me right to the edge. Fuck, I was so horny, and she wanted to tease me." Mary Eunice quirked her eyebrows, uncertain of the sensations and emotions Wendy described in her text. She couldn't imagine feeling so good about anything that she began to scream. Screaming meant pain and fear and uncertainty. How could she reach such a pleasurable peak that she screamed?

"She stopped and grinned up at me. She had my fluids and her saliva all over her chin. 'You've been awfully quiet,' she said, with that annoying, beautiful smirk. With her index finger, she trailed these maddening circles around my clit, and I couldn't help but squirm and moan. 'That's better. I want to hear your pretty voice.' She is so fucking gorgeous. I don't know how she does it to me. And she knows all of my weaknesses. 'Say my name.' I did, over and over again—each time I grew louder, her finger flicked closer to my clit. I quivered from head to toe, pleading with her, and then she wrapped her lips around me and sucked.

"The universe exploded. My every synapse went on edge. There were more stars in Lana's eyes than in the night sky." I know, Mary Eunice thought, pausing as Wendy put to words exactly what she felt—words written more than fifteen years ago which had not lost their vibrance and truth. "Everything shook. I feel like she baptized me, and I emerged born again, created anew, and basked in her presence.

"She curled up next to me and kissed me again, and we slid our sweaty bodies under the covers. I told her I loved her, and she told me the same. She's asleep now, still in my bed. But I can't relax. I keep thinking about how much noise we made. We have neighbors. I've wanted her for so long, and I love her so much. Everyone in high school said Lana and I were like sisters, as much time as we spent together, but it's never been like that. I've loved her for years, and I know that she loves me, and I'm not willing to risk losing her.

"This is illegal. I don't know if she's realized that yet. Maybe she has, and that's why she was dating Victor. And it's more illegal than me smoking a joint at the end of the day. I can give up pot. I can't give up Lana. And what if our families find out? Mama would be devastated. Lana's daddy would probably come after us with his shotgun. That can't happen. I won't risk losing her, I won't do it. She's the best thing in my life. She's my best friend. I love her so much. And I can only hope this means we'll last a long time."

The text ended; the next page gave way to several days later, and Mary Eunice closed the journal before Wendy could suck her into another erotic narrative. The cover thumped. She tilted her head back to gaze up at the ceiling of the closet, mulling over the writing. With the back of her hand,
she wiped away the sweat from her brow, nervous perspiration. She glanced over her shoulder, momentarily fearful Lana had caught her snooping, but the room was as empty as before.

Gulping, Mary Eunice took the journal and stood; her legs had stiffened from sitting in one place for so long. She placed it on Lana's bedside table on top of the copy of *Great Expectations* and returned to her assigned chore in the closet.

*God, forgive me.* As she rifled through a few incomplete photo albums, her mind wandered back to the images painted by Wendy's penmanship in her mind. *I shouldn't have read that. It was wrong of me. Lana wouldn't have wanted me to see that.* In spite of herself, her eyes brimmed, and she dabbed at them with her handkerchief, sniffling into it. The gravity of it struck her; she had read the musings of a dead woman. *She loved Lana so much. She loved Lana all the ways I can't.*

Mary Eunice lived under no pretenses, of course; she knew she could not replace Wendy, and she didn't want to. But she had come to adore Lana, had come to cherish her as a friend and ally, and it burned her insides, how much Wendy meant to Lana, how much the loss had devastated her. *Lana has lost so much. She wiped her eyes. I'm pathetic. I'm crying over someone I didn't even know. There's got to be something wrong with me.* But she didn't simply mourn Wendy. She mourned all of the love Wendy and Lana had shared, all the time they spent together, all of the bonds they had created, severed by psychopath's scalpel. *Lana deserves so much better than this.*

She emptied her nose into her handkerchief again, and she shoved the photo albums into the keep stack; she didn't open them, having learned her lesson about snooping. In one box, knitting needles and balls of yarn rolled about, the needles hooked onto a half-finished scarf pattern. Her lips quirked at the sight. *Father Joseph said I need a hobby.* She pushed the box into the keep stack alongside all the other momento's.

Almost finished sorting through the compilation of junk, she came to a shoebox. Flipping the top off of it, she found only a full bag of clumpy, dried leaves. "Oh my goodness," she breathed. *That can't be right. Lana doesn't do drugs. She said so.* Her lip flicked up between her teeth, and she sucked on it. *I'll have to ask her what she wants me to do with it.*

Standing once again, Mary Eunice went to the bathroom and washed her face; she wiped away all traces of her tears and shoved away her musings on the sexual encounter she had read. *Just don't think about it. Just forget it.* With the bag of pot clutched in her fist, she followed the sound of clicking fingers upon the keys of the typewriter to the office.

Lana typed with a fury at the keyboard before her; she had finished her column, but halfway through editing it, a buzzing of inspiration drove her back to the keys, this time punching out the horrendous experience of conversion therapy, the cold trickle of drugs into her elbow and the way her stomach clenched and sickened from it. Each color slide of a scantily clad woman sent her eyes sliding along lines of bosoms. She vomited, and it felt like a punishment. But Bloody Face—then Thredson, Dr. Thredson, a benevolent soul—and his contemporaries had no idea: society had punished her from the time she knew she loved Wendy Peyser as something more than a friend.

When she typed the last sentence, she hesitated. *I can't write that.* She tore the paper from the machine and balled it up, tossing it into the garbage can under the desk. She couldn't write about loving Wendy or any other woman. It distracted the audience's attention from the point of the book. She was writing about *Bloody Face,* not about Wendy, not about her love. "God, this is impossible." She glared at the blank white sheet of paper. "I already wrote this. I need a new scene. I need a new idea. I need a new angle."

"I'd like to see you try upside down." Lana whirled around at Mary Eunice's low voice, the bright smile upon her face—the one which always sent her heart into a swarm of butterflies taking flight, some of them heading into her throat and the rest down into her belly. "Sorry—I didn't mean to
startle you."

She still held a throaty croak of illness and sniffled through her stuffy nose, but her eyes were clear of the dehydrated glaze. Lana bit back a sigh of relief; Mary Eunice had bought into her ruse of needing the closet cleaned out, and in the process, she had remained sedentary for most of the afternoon. Lana knew better than to ask her to rest all day again, so she invented a chore which required her to stay in one place, sitting down. "You didn't. What's up?"

In her other hand, Mary Eunice clutched a bag filled with marijuana. Oh, shit. She lifted it up. "Um—What do you want me to do with this?"

Well, this is embarrassing. Lana coughed into her hand, hoping to muffle the sheepish, nervous grin spreading across her face. She felt like Mary Eunice had caught her doing something naughty and prepared to experience a reprimand. But, to her surprise, Mary Eunice didn't look judgmental. Does she even know what it is? Testing the waters, she ventured to ask, "What do you want to do with it?" in a light tone.

"I'm inclined to throw it away, but you probably spent a good bit of money on it." Her eyebrows quirked in the middle, giving her the adorable wrinkle between them, as her pink lips curled upward at the sides. "I know it's not dried up lettuce, if that's what you think."

Lana stood from the office chair. "Just making sure." She stretched and popped her back. As an afterthought, she added, "I didn't spend any money on it, but it probably put Wendy out half of a paycheck." She took the plastic bag from Mary Eunice. "I'll save it and give it to Barb for Christmas. She'll go over the moon—metaphorically, when she gets the gift, and then literally, once she's stoned."

Mary Eunice chuckled, shaking her head. "What do you want for lunch?"

"I'm having the last piece of cake."

"I threw it away."

Lana's eyes widened, incredulous. "You threw it away? Why?"

"It was stale." Her pink lips pursed. "Do you want me to make another one? It was really quite simple, if you liked it."

"Oh, don't be silly." Lana headed into the living room, glad to have a break. Sitting in the office for hours on end, wrenching words and concepts and memories from her own mind, suffocated her thoughts and muse. The familiar tremble returned to her fingers, the one which indicated the shadows erupting behind her eyes. It didn't go unnoticed by Mary Eunice, who took her free hand. The contact calmed her heart. She dropped the bag of pot onto the coffee table, making a mental note to put it away later. "Let's make some spaghetti. Does that sound good?"

"Sure."

No sooner than they had rolled up their sleeves in the kitchen, though, the doorbell rang. Mary Eunice glanced up from the sink where she had begun to fill a pot with water. "I'll get it," Lana dissuaded, leaving the jar of sauce on the counter. Gus bounced up from where he had fallen asleep in front of the couch and uttered a single warning bark. "Shush," Lana ordered, and he quieted, lying back on his stomach, both attentive eyes fixed on the front door.

Behind it, a haggard woman dressed in a patchy skirt and torn sweater stood, fidgeting with her hands and feet. A couple golden bracelets jangled on her wrists. She clutched newspaper clippings in her left hand. When Lana opened the door, she jerked upright. In spite of her bedraggled
appearance, she had a young face, lined by only a few stray wrinkles; she was in her early to middle forties. "Hello?" Lana greeted, suspicious. "Can I help you?"

"I'm here for Mary." Lana set her jaw at the sharp address. "Don't look at me like that. Tell me where she is." *I'm not sure I want to.* Lana searched for a convincing lie, but before she settled on one, the woman thrust two newspaper clippings in her face, far too close for Lana's comfort. "It's her, in this picture with you." She held the image of Mary Eunice and Lana in the cemetery. "I thought so when I first saw it, but then you wrote about her, yesterday. I knew her from the moment I saw her." She spat on the porch. Her jaws were shriveled; she had no teeth, and her skin held a sickly, yellow tinge. "Tell me where my baby is!"

*Your baby?* Irrational anger flamed to life in Lana's stomach. She swatted the rival hand out of her face, so the woman's arm fell back to her side. "Who are you?" Her annoyance sprang forth into her voice. *I don't give a fuck. She isn't yours to claim.*

The woman withdrew into herself, crossing her arms, but she tilted her head up. "You don't scare me," she threatened. Her bloodshot eyes pierced Lana's, and she straightened, drawing herself up in response. "I'm Celest Winston." *Celest.* A cold stone fell down into the pit of Lana's stomach. "I'm here to see my niece, Mary Eunice."
Mary Eunice lugged a pot of water onto the stove, the burners turned on low, and she cracked open the jar of sauce and smelled it. In the living room, Gus growled, rumbling in her chest. "Come here, Gus!" she called, but his poor reaction stirred anxiety in her stomach. Lana's voice met her ears, irritated and clipped, but she couldn't hear the words exchanged, nor could she see the other person from around the wall of the kitchen. Don't be silly. It's none of your business. It's probably just a bill collector. Gus lumbered to her with pricked ears. "Be quiet. Hang out in here with me."

He heaved a long sigh, like it troubled him to obey her, and a whine emerged from somewhere high in his throat. "Is something wrong?" His long, skinny tail, usually wagging and filled with delight, hung tucked between his hind legs. "It's okay." Mary Eunice took the hotdogs out of the refrigerator. She halved a weenie and tossed one piece down to him. "Have a snack." The silver muzzle dipped down and sniffed, but he looked back up at her without sampling it. He butted his head into her thigh, emitting another whimper.

Her hands stilled from chopping the hotdogs for the spaghetti, allowing the knife to fall back onto the cutting board. "What's the matter?" Gus had never turned up his nose to food before, especially not people food. She dropped down beside him to examine him. "Does your tummy hurt?" His round eyes met hers, pleading, jowls balancing on top of her knee. "Gus?" she pressed, and he headed back to the kitchen entrance, pausing there and gazing toward the front door where Lana lingered, holding it ajar. "It's okay," Mary Eunice soothed. "Come on."

He followed her back to the stove and lay down on the rug; she picked up the discarded hotdog and threw it away. But his tail didn't thump when she passed, and his eyes followed her, pink tongue flicking out to wet his jowls every once in awhile. Mary Eunice hovered over the stove, waiting for the water to boil. The front door creaked as Lana closed it. Then, her voice, hesitant and low, reached out in a summoning. "Sister?"

A dreadful tremble punctuated the word. That doesn't sound good. Mary Eunice's stomach erupted into a hive of startled bees beating at the walls at the sound. What could it be? Her tongue leech her mouth of all wetness, and she turned slowly, every awful scenario coming to mind. What have I done? Gus pounced to his paws and kept right at her heels. She turned off the burners and wiped her sweaty palms on her skirt. You've done nothing. You're jumping to conclusions. But then why did Lana sound so dreading?

Her feet sank into the shag carpet, eyes moving first to Lana and then to the figure beside her. The hive's hum died, and it plummeted deep into her abdomen; her breath caught somewhere between her chest and throat, crippling her from speaking or continuing to breathe properly. Gus butted his head against her thigh. She couldn't rip her gaze away from where Aunt Celest stood; a decade spent apart had altered her but not beyond recognition. Her eyes. Celest's furious blue eyes had not changed. Under them, Mary Eunice shrank, small and young and vulnerable again; she had fled from this rebuke for ten years, but she should have anticipated it would catch up with her eventually.
"Well?" The voice hadn't changed, either; it was rustier, more gnarled by cigarettes and drugs and age, but it still managed to cut her down with a single word, make her sink to the floor. "It's been ten years. Do I get a hello, or are you going to stand there like a lump all day?"

Mary Eunice tiptoed deeper into the room, nearer. She gulped the swollen portion of her throat. "Aunt Celest." Her voice was a guitar with two broken strings. "It's—I'm good to see you again." She halted beside Lana, who fixed both eyes on her, concerned and scrutinizing. Her heart pulsed stronger than ever, threatening to burst from her chest and flee.

"Is it?" At the sharp, blade-like question, Mary Eunice flinched. "It's been ten years. I might've thought you were avoiding me. No calls, no letters." Celest swung her sharp gaze to Lana. "Are you going to gape at me all day long?" She slurred her words. Tremors shook her hands, and her icy eyes were bloodshot. She's lost weight. Mary Eunice licked her lips as she studied the woman, the long brunette hair tangled beyond relief, face barren of makeup and holding exhaustion in the new wrinkles. Her skin had aged and yellowed.

Lana shuffled nearer to Mary Eunice. Fingertips brushed the inside of her forearm; warmth shed off of Lana's body, and Mary Eunice resisted the urge to grab onto her and use her as a human shield from all of Aunt Celest's criticisms, the ten years of pent-up punishments and frustrations Celest likely had in store for her. She balled her hands into fists. You're a grown-up now. Lana's whisper brushed across her ear, too low for Celest to hear. "Are you okay with this?" No. Mary Eunice nodded. "Do you want me to make her leave?" Yes, please. She shook her head. "Okay." Celest narrowed her eyes upon them, and Lana drew back, scanning her once more before she said, "I'll get started on lunch, then. Do you want something?"

The bedraggled woman hauled herself up. "No. I don't eat queer food." Lana's eyes flashed, but she set her jaw into silence; with a sharp incline of her head, she walked away, into the kitchen. Gus hesitated between the two of them, distrusting the stranger, but when Lana whistled for him, he followed her.

Mary Eunice lifted her eyes back to Aunt Celest's face, unable to find any words. But her stern expression melted, softened, and she advanced in a few limping strides. Mary Eunice stiffened, expecting Celest to strike her, but to her surprise, Celest's arms wrapped around her middle and tugged her into an embrace. She sucked in a deep breath; it took a long moment of consideration for her to offer a hesitant reciprocation. "God, Mary, I missed you."

The scent of cigarette smoke and foul breath and too much perfume wound around Mary Eunice, wreathed her in familiarity and comfort, and it brought to mind the last time she had hugged Aunt Celest, some twenty years ago now. She shadowed Aunt Celest into a supermarket and dragged Molly, only three, by the hand; Aunt Celest was about to have another baby, and she had to pick up some things for the new arrival. "Go," Aunt Celest said, flicking a dime down into Mary Eunice's palm. "Get a candy bar to share. I'll meet you at the sweets before I check out."

The words were a dismissal, and Mary Eunice smiled at Molly as she led the way to the sweets, holding fast to her hand. Molly sucked her other thumb. Her big blue eyes roamed the aisles and the other patrons mulling about. In front of the sweets box, she paused. "Okay, what kind do you want?" She clutched the dime in her other palm, warming it. "You can get a bag of M&M's, or a Mr. Goodbar or a Krackel, or we can get ten little bits." She enviously eyed the box containing the Bit O Honey, but she predicted Molly's next words.

Mumbling around her thumb, she said, "Bwack Taffy, pwease."

Mary Eunice frowned. "I don't see any." She dropped down to her knees to look farther back on the shelf; the box of Black Jack Taffy was empty, pushed all the way to the back. She looped her arm back there and hooked her little finger in it to drag it to the front. "No, it's empty." She
glanced back up to the space that Molly had just stood, now vacant. "Molly?"

Down at the end of the aisle, Molly gazed up at a man wearing a heavy brown coat. Mary Eunice frowned, calling out her name again, but Molly didn't hear. "Did I hear that right?" the man was saying. "You like Black Jack Taffy?" Molly bobbed her head, brown ringlets bouncing where she grinned, still sucking her thumb. "Well, you know what? I have a whole big box of Black Jack Taffy in my car. You can have all you want. Do you want to come with me and see?" Molly nodded again, and she lifted a delicate hand to place in the stranger's palm.

"Wait! Molly!" Mary Eunice raced after them. The man glanced back at her and tugged Molly a little faster, a little harder. Molly stumbled when she turned her head. "Molly!" At the last summons, Molly struggled to free her arm from the friendly grasp which had quickly turned volatile. He snatched at her again. She fell and promptly burst into tears, but the stranger's fingers didn't relinquish their grip on her arm, dragging her upright. The tips of her shoes squeaked on the tile.

"Let go of her!" Mary Eunice gathered up Molly's frail body in her short arms. The strong man pulled both of them. Molly's wail grew into a shriek of pain and terror.

One of the store employees jogged around the corner at the sound of the screaming child. "Hey! What are you doing to those girls?" Like lightning, he released Molly, and Mary Eunice fell back onto her rump, both arms wrapped around Molly's middle. She buried her face into Molly's hair and began to cry as well. The man bolted from the store, knocking over a shelf in his wake. "Whose children are these?"

Lumbering toward the fiasco, Aunt Celest balanced a hand on her distended abdomen, the other clutching her basket of items. "They're mine." Mary Eunice wanted to run to her and hide behind her legs, but she couldn't bring herself to let go of Molly, who continued to wail without consolation. To her great relief, Aunt Celest shuffled right behind them, sheltering them. "What happened? Did they do something?" She glanced, apprehensive, toward the toppled shelf of items.

The clerk drew himself up. "No—there was a man, dragging that little one by her arm, and then the older one was dragging her right back—I can't believe it." He mopped his hand through his hair. "In my store—Do you want me to call the police? He ran out, he knocked over that stuff, probably long gone—"

"No, no, it's fine." With great effort, Aunt Celest kneeled beside them. "Come here, girls. It's alright." Her arms swept them into a hug, clutching Mary Eunice close to her chest; she strained against the swell of the round tummy where movement stirred. "I'm so glad you're alright." Mary Eunice hid her face in the crook of her neck and wept, relief swamping her where the comforting hand smoothed up the flat of her back. "It's okay, sweetheart."

The tight embrace sucked her back into that moment, and her arms wound tighter around Aunt Celest at the memory. A skeleton-thin body shivered back at her. Celest pushed her away and held her at arm's length. "Do you have any idea how scared I was?" Her eyes shimmered but did not shed tears; Aunt Celest never cried. "You leave in the morning with five children and come home to four—no note? No explanation, no clue—The police wouldn't look for you, they said you'd run away—I told them, I said, 'Not my Mary, she would never, she didn't even pack a bag,' and they wouldn't listen to me—I thought you were dead—it was weeks before Father William told me anything at all."

To the couch, Aunt Celest dragged her, her feet shuffling in obedience while her mind shuffled things into compartments, blanking out; her memories crisscrossed and danced at the forefront, struggling to organize themselves. "Twelve years—" Celest lit a cigarette and lifted it to her mouth. She sucked a deep breath through it. Gray smoke exhaled her from her mouth and nostrils,
floating in a calm cloud. *Should she smoke in Lana's house?* Mary Eunice bit her lip, but she didn't have the courage to confront her. "Twelve years, I raised you like my own. I get this letter from somewhere in fuck-all, Maryland—tells me Ella is dead and I'm the next of kin. I felt like somebody punched me in the gut. I'm nineteen years old, I already have a baby with no daddy, suddenly I'm hitching across the country in strangers' pick-up trucks."

She blew another ring of smoke. "It was a mistake, her marrying that man—her running so far away from home. I'm sure, if she had known how things would go, what would happen to Herbert, she would have stayed." She flicked the ashes into the carpet. Mary Eunice winced at the sight. Celest didn't notice. "I get to that awful orphanage—find you—you look like you haven't heard a kind word since half past never, haven't been offered a meal or a change of clothes since the 1930's. That place, it was a concentration camp for children. Do you remember it?"

"Not much," Mary Eunice mumbled. She recalled through a vague haze, a lot of children crying, a few harried nuns running about with the youngest babies, trying to find something to feed them. "I think we had two meals a day. Breakfast and before bed."

"And you probably gave one of yours away," Celest quipped in return. Mary Eunice quieted. "I knew who you were, anyway—you were skinnier than a giraffe's neck, but you looked just like Ella. You always have looked just like her." The light on the end of her cigarette went out, so she flicked the lighter again. "You're older, now, than she was when she died." *I know.* The reminder made nerves quiver inside her abdomen. She gazed down at the floor, at the gray cigarette butts, like she could clean them with her eyes. She couldn't look at Aunt Celest. "I told myself for years—just gotta get the kid to twenty-three. If she makes it to twenty-three, she'll beat Ella. Ella would be okay with that, if I get the kid to twenty-three. By then, she'll have her own husband, she's stupid and she ain't all that pretty, but she's a hard worker. She'll have some kids of her own, and Ella will be proud of her. By the time she's twenty-three, everything will be alright."

*A husband?* The word sounded false, wrong, as she mulled it over in her mind. Why did it feel so strange inside her body? She couldn't identify the cause of the weird sensation. But Celest paid no heed to her discomfort. "I never would've guessed I was going to lose you at seventeen. God, I wasn't ready. I was already dreading you graduating high school—you know, your oldest grows up, and suddenly that means you're old. When your children are adults, you're old. I'm worrying about you making me a grandmother before I'm ready—" Mary Eunice blanched at the prospect. "—and then, you just, you just disappear. Right out from under my nose. I realized, then, that I had fucked up. Maybe you were dead, who knew. I fucked up."

Mary Eunice lifted her head, surprised at the sharp words. Her lips pursed, but no words surfaced to provide comfort; she didn't know what to say. *No,* ran through her mind, but she had never learned how to say that word well. "Oh, don't look at me like that." Celest dragged the cigarette through her lips again. "The others will tell you—the ones who can, anyway. I was a horrible mother. You raised my children for me. James called you Mama before he did me. You leave, and the house falls apart."

"What—What happened?" *Should I ask?*

The smoke curling out of her nostrils did not soften her harsh snort. "Molly hates me. It started, then, when we were looking for you—we found your note on the bed, but it didn't say where you'd gone, and Molly convinced herself that someone had kidnapped you and forced you to write it." Tears sprang to Mary Eunice's eyes at the sharp words. *Of course she would have thought that.* "It was all my fault. I couldn't take off of work to look for you. She blamed herself, too—never shut up about it. For weeks, it was the same rant, how sorry she was that she had taken your money and let you go to that party—"

Celest shook her head, clucking her tongue. "Once Father William broke and told us where you'd
gone, she went to the abbey herself. I guess you were gone by then. I caught her writing to you, but she wouldn't tell me where. She swore you'd left to get away from me." That's not true. The last of the cigarette died, and she dropped the remnants into her pocket. "She left the day she turned eighteen. She'd saved money, she'd been accepted into some college—she didn't need me anymore. I haven't seen her since." Mary Eunice began to cry, tears sliding out of her eyes. She fought for her self-control. Molly turned eighteen seven years ago.

"Carol—god, Carol was lost without the both of you. She was directionless. I tried to give her some, some guidance—as if I'm not the most misguided person to ever walk this earth. She ran off with some boy and got married, left as soon as she could, haven't heard from her in years—I guess it's been four years, now. She wrote me to tell me I had a granddaughter. No address. I couldn't write back to her." Celest droned on like she spoke of something as mundane as the weather. She held no expression in her voice or on her face. "James turned eighteen and left for the army the same day, doesn't know what he's fighting for, doesn't know what he's doing—getting the hell away from me, I guess. He has no problem telling me I'm a fuck-up, anyway, hasn't for years. I'm glad to be rid of him. I'm better in my misery—alone."

Alone? "But—what about Patricia?"

Aunt Celest scoffed, derisive and scornful, as icy daggers flung from her eyes. "Patty took after me. She was just stupid about it."

Mary Eunice's eyebrows quirked in the middle at the ambiguous words. "I—I don't understand."

Her stomach clenched with guilt as Celest inclined her eyebrows. "Of course you don't." She wrung her hands in her lap, right picking at the left through the fabric of her shirt, and shrank where she sat. The cutting words split her chest into two pieces. "Patty's dead." Mary Eunice lifted her gaze back to Aunt Celest, widening in shock. The weak tears brimmed back to the surface and flowed over the edges. "She couldn't smoke her grass like a normal kid. She took up smack like an idiot. James found her last summer—needle still stuck in her arm. It can't be. Mary Eunice's face crumpled at the crude delivery. Her stomach ached; all hunger vanished into nausea, boiling in her middle. "You ran off and left—they didn't have anybody. It tore us apart."

This is all my fault. Mary Eunice closed her eyes and hid her face in her hands; it burned under Celest's critical, scornful gaze. Aunt Celest had always hated to see her cry. "I—I'm so sorry," she said, straining around the lump in her throat. I ran away. I ran away and it killed Patricia. A shudder wracked her shoulders, fighting to suppress the sob threatening the inside of her chest while those hateful eyes rested on her. "I'm sorry," she said again; all the hair stood up on the back of her neck where Aunt Celest expected more from her. You're a disappointment, even now. You always have been.

"Naturally. You're sorry." The word drawled out. Aunt Celest wiped her sweaty brow with a shaking hand, face flushed. "Everything I've done for you—I find you here, shacking up with some faggot—"

Mary Eunice cringed at the slur, curling her tongue. "Please don't use that word," she whispered, a hurried, pleading instruction. A loathing look replied with more words than Celest could manage. She tucked a little smaller, a little deeper into herself; she grappled with her bravery to keep looking at the woman who had raised her. "I—I'm sorry, I'll do anything."

In the kitchen, Lana stirred the pot of boiling water, hand clenching tighter around the handle of her spoon with every word she overheard. Gus lay in the door frame. He watched with pricked ears, head lifted, not allowing himself to relax; Lana had tried to distract him with his dog treats, but he didn't so much as sniff at it. We'll have to keep an eye on him. Nerves pricked to life in her belly at the prospect of Gus having issues with strangers. It doesn't make any sense. He's been fine
with everyone else we've met, even the vet. His behavior was unlike him, to say the least. Maybe he's territorial.

She sank her teeth into the tip of her tongue to keep from interrupting each time Celest cut into Mary Eunice with her tongue. "She's stupid and she ain't all that pretty," floated into the kitchen, and Lana hissed a string of swear words to muffle the rest of the sentence. She's not stupid, and she's beautiful, and you are the walking explanation for all of her self-esteem problems. Lana ground her teeth. She hadn't yet poured the noodles into the pot, hoping Celest would leave before the meal was finished, but her stomach growled. If the bitch doesn't want any queer food, we can eat in front of her. With that thought, she poured the dry noodles into the water.

Fighting not to eavesdrop, she sought out the pasta strainer. In spite of her effort, the coarse announcement, "Patty's dead," reached her, and Mary Eunice's pathetic, muffled sob, her soft pleas for forgiveness. What a cold, heartless bitch. Lana toed her way to the edge of the kitchen to peer out at them, Mary Eunice hugging herself for comfort while Celest remained scornful and stagnant.

Gus pounced to his feet when another meek whimper came from her. "No," Lana ordered, and he paused mid-step, glancing back at her. "I know." Her heart wrenched at the tears on Mary Eunice's pink face, but she didn't dare interrupt the meeting. Mary Eunice had said she found this acceptable, and Lana had no reason not to hold her at her word. "Come in here. Come here!" Gus retreated deeper into the kitchen at her beckoning and lay down on the rug. "Good boy."

Shoving her spoon back into the pot, Lana stirred the noodles as they began to soften. It's none of my business. We'll talk about it after she's gone. Overwhelming pity whirled inside of her, and it burned because she knew Mary Eunice would not want any pity. I can't believe she grew up with that bitch. Her lip curled. For all of her family's mistakes, Lana had never condemned her childhood as anything less than pleasant, if sometimes punctuated by poverty and southern ideals. Her parents were ordinary. But Celest, harsh and critical and disapproving, had no words to build Mary Eunice, cut her at every opportunity. No wonder she's such a martyr. She grew up thinking she's worth nothing.

"I need money—I'm not making rent. Nobody wants to fuck a shoddy old whore with no teeth.” Lana's gut boiled. It's a set-up. She had come here for a reason—to guilt Mary Eunice into giving her what she wanted. She didn't care to reconnect with her family. Mary Eunice doesn't have any money. Oh, god. Lana mopped a hand through her hair. The nasty woman didn't deserve a second of Mary Eunice's time, let alone so much of a penny. She doesn't want queer food, she shouldn't want queer money.

"I—I don't have anything." The bare whisper choked when Mary Eunice coughed. Her breath shivered a few times before she managed, 'I'm sorry, I don't have any money."

Bitter words growled from the despicable witch. "After all I've done for you? After I took you as my own?" Her voice grew louder. Gus rose from the rug, a distressed whine rising to his chest. He bumped his head against Lana's thigh, and she scratched behind his ear, but her heart rate increased, and she could not reassure him. "You owe me—I could've left you to rot in that orphanage—who knows where you would have ended up? My own flesh and blood—like your mother cared enough to give a shit about you—"

The punched sentence fragments raised into a shout. Shit. Lana peeked out of the kitchen again; Mary Eunice had curled up with her knees to her chest, making herself as small as possible. "I'm sorry," she repeated in a mewl. "If I had anything, you could have it, I swear—"

Celest launched herself at Mary Eunice, arms extended, and they both rolled onto the floor. A flurry of unintelligible slurs flung from her mouth. Bony fists pummelled Mary Eunice's back. The
spoon slipped out of Lana's hand, paralysis latching her to the spot as the woman attacked Mary Eunice, how dare she? and Gus barreled past her out of the kitchen, breaking her from her reverie far too late.

The string of condemnations burst into a screech when Gus slammed into Celest, sinking his teeth into her calf. Mary Eunice sprang up onto her knees and grabbed him by the collar. She hauled him back, away from where Celest stumbled. She collapsed on top of the coffee table. It buckled under her weight and snapped into two pieces. Lana ran to Mary Eunice, who quivered from head to toe, both hands clutching Gus's collar. He sponged her wet cheeks with his tongue.

A disbelieving wail rose from Celest as she staggered back to her feet. "It bit me! That crazy dog bit me!"

Lana stepped in front of her, blocking her from Mary Eunice; she squared up, prepared to dodge a punch or throw one if she had to. "Yeah, he bit you, you idiotic bimbo!" Celest's eyes widened, mouth opening into a gape at the sharp address. Behind her, Mary Eunice whispered a stammering protest. Lana ignored her. "I ought to bite you!"

"Buh-Buh-Bad dog, Gus," Mary Eunice scolded under her breath. He whined.

Bloodshot, dilated eyes narrowed at Lana in a scrutinizing squint. "I will not be spoken to in that way." Her hand attempted to draw into a fist, but the tremors overtook, seizing her fingers. Sweat dribbled down her face from her hairline, and her jaw clenched. She's on something. She wants money for her next fix.

"Get the fuck out of my house." Blue eyes darted around her, trying to catch a glimpse of Mary Eunice. If you touch her again, I will beat the shit out of you. Lana's heart thrashed into panicked fits, and she clenched her fists, breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth to steady herself. "Did you hear me? Get out of my house."

A meek whisper from behind her rose, timid in its stammered pronunciation. "It's okay, Lana. I'm okay." She sniffled.

Lana set her jaw. It's not okay. She's not staying here. Celest stared back at her, waiting for her to relent; she nodded pointedly toward the door in instruction. "I don't take orders from queers," Celest spat in return. "Get out of my way." No. Lana drew herself up taller, and when Celest lunged, she extended her hands, palms catching on her shoulders, and shoved her back. "Don't touch me, you fucking pervert!"

Celest stumbled on the broken coffee table, tripping sideways; she caught herself on the arm of the couch and pulled herself back up. Still, she thrashed when Lana grabbed her elbow, shrieking like a feral cat. "Believe me, you're not my type." Lana ripped the door open and flung her out of it. "Get lost, you old skank." She slammed the door and locked it.

Hands slapped the door in a frenzy. It held firm. "You let me in! You filthy cunt!"

The separating wall muffled her words, so when Lana walked away, back toward the place in the floor where Mary Eunice clutched Gus like a life raft, she couldn't make out the slurs. He nudged her face with his black nose, skinny tail forming tiny thumps, seeking approval. Her jaw chattered, hands and shoulders and mouth quivering; her whole body twitched with anxious ripples. Lana dropped down onto the carpet beside her. Hesitant, she placed her hand on Mary Eunice's shoulder, light as a feather. Mary Eunice hiccuped and flinched in surprise. Lana withdrew. Don't frighten her. Mary Eunice was like a nervous horse, anticipating another harsh touch at any moment.
Gus continued to lick the tears from her face as they shed. The sound of clicking teeth rattled from the uncontrollable jerks of her lower jaw. "Are you hurt?" Lana asked, and she shook her head. The words broke her anxious reverie as her white-knuckled hands unlatched from Gus's collar. She curled into herself. Each breath choked in her throat. Her knees folded up to her chest again, arms wrapping around them. Her breaths came in short pants through her mouth, nose too stuffed up to manage. *She's panicking.* Lana shuffled nearer on her knees. *I've got to do something.* She hadn't a clue where to begin. *Ask her. Let her know you're here.* "What can I do?"

Mary Eunice closed her eyes. Her face screwed up as she fought to regain control of her lips. They buffered against one another, producing a stuttering stream before she forfeited, and she shook her head, unable to communicate. Lana winced and bit her lower lip. *Take it slowly. Don't touch her.* "It's okay." She dropped her voice, low in the hopes she could provide some comfort. "Can you tell me what's going on?"

She launched into another set of sputters, a faulty motor in an old car. "I cuh-cuh-can't—I can't fuh-feel my fuh-face." She gulped aloud and choked. Her chest heaved into a fit of dry coughs, and she gasped for air, mouth working like a flopping fish on the shore.

"Is it okay if I touch you?" Her head bobbed in agreement, so Lana extended a hand to settle on her shoulder. Mary Eunice flinched beneath it, but then she caved, rolling beside her friend. Her skin and muscles twitched there. *I don't know if this is right.* But what else could she do? "Calm down. It's okay. Take a deep breath." Mary Eunice choked on her attempt and hiccuped again. *That's not helping.* Lana's doubt and uncertainty grew. "Think about something pleasant—think about where you feel safest. Where is that?"

One of the sweating, quivering hands fumbled into Lana's lap; she took it into her left hand, right stretched around her shoulders and smoothing up and down her back. "Wuh-With you."

Lana's heart squeezed. *Of course. I let her get her ass kicked. I'm supposed to protect her. That's what I promised the Monsignor—that she would be safe.* She squelched her deprecation. *She needs you now.* "Okay. Think about me. Think about us. We're in bed. You can hear the crickets outside, and Gus is on the foot of the bed. Everything is calm." The tremors relaxed by a margin, and Mary Eunice gave Lana's hand a long squeeze. "Good. I'm here." Her heavy pants slowed and lengthened. "Sunshine…” Pale lips buffered against one another, and Lana waited for her to speak, but she didn't, mouthing words but not pronouncing them aloud. *She's praying.* Lana fell silent to allow her the silence to think.

Incoherent babbles sounded from the other side of the door in their quiet. *Is that crazy bitch going to leave?* Lana bit her tongue, reluctant to add to Mary Eunice's panic. Once her breath had steadied and she made the Sign of the Cross, Lana leaned nearer and pressed a kiss to her temple. Mary Eunice gulped and choked out an apology. "I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything wrong." Lana plucked a lock of golden hair back out of her eyes and tucked it behind her ear, exposing the pink face. Gus rose to lick her again, and then he lay down, resting his head in Mary Eunice's lap. She played with his floppy ears. "Did you…” Lana paused, hesitating, but Mary Eunice glanced up at her. "Did you grow up like that?"

Mary Eunice shook her head, eyes falling back to the carpet. She licked her lips. "No. She—She didn't become that way until, until she started using, when I was a teenager." Wiping her face with the back of her hand, she continued, "I had hoped she had—had changed, done better, I just assumed they were okay, they had never not been okay—"

"Don't, don't start blaming yourself." Mary Eunice fell silent at Lana's interruption. "Nothing is your fault. Do you hear me? You're not responsible for anything that happened to them. Okay? It's not your fault that she's a shitty mom."
"But I abandoned them. They needed me, and I ran away." Their hands severed as Mary Eunice withdrew, tucking it into her lap. "I should've stayed—I shouldn't have been such a coward—I've always been such an idiot. I can't believe, Patricia—" Her voice broke.

Lana gazed at the side of her face, helplessness twisting inside of her stomach. *I don't know how to fix this, I don't know how to comfort you.* "I'm sorry," she said. Mary Eunice leaned against her, resting her head on her shoulder. Her chest warmed at the spilling of golden locks over her. "There's nothing you could have done."

Blue eyes pinched closed. "I could have been there. I could have stayed." Her hand picked at her arm, but Lana allowed the nervous expression, reluctant to interrupt her. "I didn't know I was all they had. I thought they were old enough…" Her words died again. "She was only nineteen."

Lana quieted, unable to think of any more words of comfort. *She made her choices.* The callous remark died on her tongue. It wouldn't help. "We need to eat lunch." She began to rise, reaching for Mary Eunice's hand, and she tugged her to her feet. A protest formed on her pink lips, but Lana interrupted her. "I know, you're not hungry. You need to eat anyway. I don't want you to get sick again."

The slapping sounds from outside died down while they ate, noodles soggy from being boiled too long and sauce somewhat burnt. Mary Eunice pushed it around on her plate with her fork; she managed a few bites when Lana glanced up at her, but she left quite a bit behind when she rose to do the dishes. Lana left her to devices, instead coming to the destroyed remnants of the coffee table. "Good riddance." She sorted through the wood splinters. "Wait a minute…" Turning to glance over her shoulder, she called, "Sister? Do you remember what I did with the bag of pot?"

"You put it on the coffee table. Is it not in the floor?"

"No!" Lana huffed. "It's the principle of the thing." *There goes Barb's Christmas. And twenty bucks worth of pot.* Rage curled in her gut. *That's an electric bill worth of pot. She'll probably trade it for her next hit.* "Stupid bitch," she muttered under her breath. "I should've decked her."

Lana combed through the splinters and dropped the pieces into the trash can.

Mary Eunice left the kitchen; she had washed her sweaty face and pulled her hair back out of her eyes into a low ponytail, but her hands trembled, not yet recovered from her panic. The corner of her lip had swollen. *That bitch hit her.* Lana swallowed hard to prevent the rage from surfacing upon her face. "I'm sorry," she said again.

"I'm not your fault." Gus bumped his head against Mary Eunice's thigh, and she stretched her arm down to scratch him behind his ears. Lana lifted herself onto the couch. Mary Eunice followed suit, and Lana stretched out to lean her back against her shoulder. "Give me your hand." Mary Eunice slipped her arm over Lana's shoulders to comply, warm in its drape. Lana cradled her hand where it rested on the squishy upper part of her stomach. *She is so soft.* A nose pressed into her hair, a long breath sucking inward as Mary Eunice drank in her scent. Tingles shot down Lana's spine. The hair on the back of her neck rose. Something hot twisted in her stomach, deep below the place where Mary Eunice's hand rested, and she shivered.

The face drew back from her hair. "Are you cold?" she worried; Lana tilted her head back to
watch her teeth grab at her chapped, scabbed lower lip. The light in her eyes had muted, buried somewhere in the midst of grief, anxiety, and confusion. She didn't manage a smile.

Lana pushed one onto her lips. "No, I'm fine."

The back of Mary Eunice's other hand brushed her cheek, measuring her temperature. "Do you feel sick?" Lana shook her head. "Okay." Lana squeezed the hand resting on her tummy, and Mary Eunice squeezed back, settling in silence; she averted her eyes, gazing down at the floor, with a distant, vacant look. Lana looked at her solemn face. I wish I could make her feel better. But she couldn't remove Mary Eunice's grief any more than Mary Eunice could take hers. She traced her thumb over the back of her hand; she had done this so many times, she had memorized the knuckles and bones and veins. I'm here.

The quiet extended between them, a blank canvas filled with musing, until Gus whined. He stood by the front door. Lana pushed herself up. "I'll take him outside." Taking his leash from the coat rack, she clipped it to his collar. To her surprise, Mary Eunice jumped to her feet, prepared to follow her. Let her. She needs you. Lana slid the leash over her wrist and took Mary Eunice's hand again.

Mary Eunice glanced down at the place where Lana held onto her. The contact warmed her cold fingers; she folded them into the valleys of Lana's hand so their knuckles formed a mountain range, a protective fortress which sheltered both of them from the horrors of the rest of the world. A long breath eased from her lungs, releasing the pent-up tension inside her chest. I can do all things. Her eyelashes fluttered closed. She took a breath of a moment to focus on the warmth of Lana's palm against hers. Through Christ, who gives me strength. She had never anticipated Jesus would appear to her in such a form, so beautiful and feminine and vulgar, but the courage she drew from Lana could make her derivative of nothing else.

Lana unlocked the front door, but as she turned the knob and opened it, a shriek sounded from outside. Celest hurled herself at them. Gus lunged at the screen door with snapping jaws; Lana dragged him back by the leash and slammed the door shut, locking it again. The pummeling fists struck the wood with twice the fury of before. "What the fuck!" Gus squared himself, fur sticking up all the way down his spine, and faced the door with booming barks of defense. "Hush, hush—Gus, shut up!" He quieted into a rumbling growl.

The brief courage dissolved like acid; Mary Eunice's heart thrashed into her throat. Through the door, Celest screeched, "You let me in! You fucking cunt! You faggot!" Each insult smarted the inside of her chest. She retreated, crossing her arms as the horror of it melted over her. "Open this door!"

A heavy, patient sigh fluttered from between Lana's lips. She leaned her back against the door, both eyes fixed on the ceiling. Her mouth buffered in silent consideration, talking to herself, and Mary Eunice didn't dare interrupt her train of thought. Then, Lana straightened. "Take Gus to the bedroom and shut the door."

Oh no. Mary Eunice's chest quivered at those words and their implications. "Why?" she asked, unsure if she wanted to know. She can't go out there. They'll kill each other. Her heart wrenched when another broken, furious wail shivered through the wall; she closed her eyes, trying to shut it out. Why had this become of her family? Why had this happened to her Aunt Celest? It isn't fair.

"I'm calling the cops. I don't want some trigger-happy asshole to shoot him."

Tears sprang to her eyes, and she cursed herself. I'm so stupid. This is all my fault. I can't believe I dragged Lana into this mess. "N-No, please, don't—" Her saliva thickened, and she gulped, breath quivering as she exhaled to keep herself from crying. "Let me talk to her, please."
Lana's incredulous eyes widened. "Talk to her?" she repeated. "You can't talk to her. She's not in her right mind. She's not stable—" Mary Eunice stuttered over her next sentence, uncertain how to begin explaining the self-deprecating thoughts churning in her mind. "I just watched her throw you in the floor and kick you like a goddamn soccer ball."

"I—I know, I upset her." Mary Eunice licked her lips. "I think I can calm her down. Please, let me try." She couldn't maintain eye contact with Lana, afraid of the rebuke she would receive in return for her optimism. *I don't want to send Aunt Celest to jail.* Her hands wrung in front of her body in a twisting, cold bundle. "I owe it to her."

The warmer, dryer hands took hers, tugged the jagged fingernails of her right hand away from her left arm. "Look at me." Reluctant, Mary Eunice lifted her eyes from the floor to Lana's beautiful brown depths, sweet as pools of dark chocolate. "You don't owe her a damn thing. I promise you that. She made her choices. She chose the path she's on." With each sentence, Lana clutched tighter, pressing the words into her skin. "I promised I would keep you safe."

Her breath caught in her throat. *I know.* Mary Eunice pictured it, herself nodding in agreement and obeying and hiding with Gus while Lana called the police, burying herself in Lana's embrace when the guilt overwhelmed her and allowing Lana to soothe all the twists inside her chest and gut; it would be so easy to do those things, to cry her troubles onto Lana's shoulder and become vulnerable for her. But she couldn't allow herself that reprieve. "She's the only mother I've ever had." Her voice quivered with weakness as she spoke. *I've never done anything but disappoint her.*

Twin tears escaped from her brimming eyes, and Lana released her hands to cup her cheeks, both thumbs wiping the tears away. Her sweet brown eyes carved into the front of Mary Eunice's face, but she couldn't bear to make eye contact again; shame pooled in her abdomen. *I already ran away. I can't let Lana solve my problems for me. I can't keep running away.* The pad of Lana's thumbs brushed her high, cushioned cheekbones. "Okay," she allowed, reluctant in the exhaled word. "Try to talk to her." A smooth index caught a lock of blonde hair and tucked it behind her ear. "But if she touches you again, I swear to god I will beat the shit out of her. You won't need Gus to bite her."

A tiny smile cracked Mary Eunice's tortured face. Lana tugged her into a hug, arms settling around her neck, and she settled hers on Lana's waist. "Thank you." Lana kissed her flush on the cheek. *I don't want to let go. I never want to let go.* She retreated from the embrace and went to the front door, its innocent facade; on the other side, Celest waited. Her stomach whirled. *Don't puke, don't puke, don't puke.* She swallowed hard. Once the brief nausea passed, she unlocked the door and opened it a crack. Lana stood outside of view, clutching Gus by his collar.

Celest sat on the porch with a cigarette between her fingers. She cranked her head back to glare at the opening door. Smoke exhaled in a cloud from her nose and wrinkled mouth. "Aunt Celest?" Mary Eunice squeaked the name. The cutting blue eyes never failed to make her feel tiny and pathetic. "Can I talk to you?"

She turned away, shoulders huffing. "Whatever." *Is that a yes or no?* Mary Eunice hesitated until Celest whirled again. "Come the fuck out here and talk, then, you fucking idiot. Honestly, God gave a goldfish more sense. At least you can train them to swim backward." Mary Eunice stepped out of the home, through the screen door, and closed both of them behind her. The curtains at the window rustled, opening a tiny gap at the bottom left corner for Lana to peek through. The protective eyes on her back relaxed the built tension in her shoulders. "What do you want?"

Mary Eunice balanced her weight on the balls of her feet to muffle the sound of her footsteps as she prowled around Aunt Celest. Her heart skipped above its usual rate while she stared at the
other woman, gauging her every movement and preparing for backlash. The hands still held those volatile tremors, eyes still bloodshot, face still flushed and red. "I want to say I'm sorry," Mary Eunice said as she scanned the older woman again.

Celest lurched to her feet. "Bullshit!" Mary Eunice stumbled a step back, widening the gap between them. Her hands fluttered up from her sides. She held her palms up, prepared to catch Celest if fists hurled at her. Celest spat a large loogie upon the porch. "You ain't sorry for nothing, you ungrateful little wretch." She pinched her cigarette between her fingers. Ashes fell from its smoldering orange tip. "You're out here because your faggot friend is afraid of me."

"Please don't call her that." To her surprise, her voice only quavered a bit, and it didn't drop to a terrified whisper.

"I'll call her whatever I damn well please. It's disgraceful." Celest took another drag from her cigarette. "Tell her I'll get lost for fifteen bucks. That's what I'd make whoring. Showing up here and wallowing with her ilk is almost the same."

_Her ilk?_ Mary Eunice's tongue darted across her lips; she wiped her sweaty palms on the front of her shirt and tugged at the sleeves. _Lord, guide me._ "I—I can't give you any money. I'm sorry."

With a flick of the cigarette, butts landed in a smattering across her front. Mary Eunice glanced down at the gray smear on her shirt. "How long has it been since you saw a doctor?"

Celest snorted. "Doctor? Who gives a shit about any doctor? What are you playing at?" As her courage ebbed and she shrugged, Celest inclined her eyebrows. "I don't need a doctor. I need money. I need to make rent and keep a goddamn roof over my head—after all I gave to you, after I sheltered you, and you won't give me a pot to piss in!" She dropped the cigarette and smashed it under her shoe. "I never would've thought it of you, you of all people, to turn me away when I needed you. You always were a fucking disappointment—a burden." The last word stung; Mary Eunice flinched, and Celest noticed. "No wonder Ella offed herself."

Poisoned darts sailed from her tongue and punctured Mary Eunice's chest. Her arms withdrew, tucking into one another. More than anything, she wanted to wheel back into the house and flee to Lana; she measured a breath through her nose to hold herself steady. _Don't listen to her. It isn't her. It's the drug. It makes her say and do bad things._ "I don't have any money," she repeated. "I want to help you. You're my family. I want you to get better."

"Help me?" she mimicked. "Go help yourself." Mary Eunice side-stepped from where hands clasped at her arms; instead, she caught a handful of hair and clothing. Celest slung sideways with all of her strength, and their legs tangled as Mary Eunice lost her footing. She clung to Celest in a reflexive attempt to keep herself upright. "Let go of me!" With another aggressive shove, Mary Eunice spilled over the side of the porch, dragging Celest with her.

The decorative shrubs broke the brief freefall. All the air whooshed out of her lungs, and she rolled with the impact, hands grappling at Celest's thin frame on top of her. Their combined mats of hair blocked out the sun. She sucked in a deep breath and propped herself up onto her elbows. "Are you oh—" A knee plunged into her stomach. Celest dragged at her hair and crashed a rough-knuckled punch against the side of her neck. _She's trying to kill me!_

Mary Eunice dodged the next fist hurled at her face. It smashed into the dirt. Celest howled with frustration as Mary Eunice wriggled beneath her, fighting to bring her knees up and protect her soft stomach. Stars danced in her vision when the knee slammed into her crotch and ground. A vice pinched around her throat and tightened, closing her airway. _Why is she doing this?_ Blind and desperate, Mary Eunice pawed for a hold on anything, anything to free herself. One hand clawed and closed around a crinkling plastic bag in Celest's shirt. She tugged until it came free. _God, please, have mercy._
Another shriek upstarted. An impact rattled her teeth, but the weight vanished from on top of her her. She lay back on the grass, gasping for breath. Everything shimmered like a kaleidoscope. Her throat loosened. What happened? Where did she go? Dizzy, she fought to prop herself onto her elbows, the bag of pot clutched in her hand like a weapon or a shield. The late afternoon sunlight cast halos around everything. Mind swimming, she swallowed the coppery blood in her mouth.

A few yards away, Lana hovered over Celest, punches flurrying at her face. "Lana—" Mary Eunice intended to wail the name in protest, but her voice choked. She dragged herself closer on her hands and knees. "Lana!" She caught Lana by the shoulder and tugged back. "Stop! Stop it, you're killing her!" Tears and snot and blood dribbled down Lana's flushed face. She drew back to hurl another fist, but Mary Eunice caught her arm. "Please, please, don't—"

Lana flinched and pushed herself backward, off of Celest, and she grabbed onto Mary Eunice. "Are you okay? Are you okay? Are you okay?" The string blended together, some of them hardly intelligible, but Mary Eunice bobbed her head all the same.

Celest twitched feebly where Lana left her lying. Mary Eunice crawled beside her, ignoring Lana's soft protest and grappling fingers. Blood ran out of her toothless mouth and nose. "Aunt Celest?" she whispered. Slow, she pushed herself onto her trembling arms. Big tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. I've never seen her cry before. Mary Eunice's mouth quivered, unable to fathom any words.

The baleful eyes fixed upon her, and she froze like a deer in headlights. I'm in trouble now. Her gut trembled with the notion. Rooted to the spot, she gulped. Celest's every muscle tensed. "Watch out—" Lana's cry came far too late as Celest hurled herself at Mary Eunice, a flashing silver blade clutched in her right hand. Mary Eunice scrambled backward from the straight razor; the first slash missed her face, so close the air whistled where it cut. She fought to backpedal farther, faster, confused in her panic as she fled. Why is she doing this? Her elbow caved underneath her.

The razor descended again. Her face screwed up, unable to watch, but the slash didn't land. Arms wreathed around her, one guarding her face and the other upon her throat. "Fuck!" Mary Eunice scrabbled at Lana's proclamation. She hurled herself upward. Blood streamed from the long laceration marring the back of Lana's left arm. She saved me. Celest dove again before she could stop to consider it.

Mary Eunice rose and caught her by the wrist. "Drop it!" She didn't recognize the sound of her own voice. "Drop it!" The other arm batted at her, but she hardly registered the blows; her vision melted into a furious red haze. Gathering her legs beneath her, she pounced and seized Celest by the throat with her right hand, the left flattening the dangerously floundering arm. "Drop it!" she roared. The vibrations shivered in her chest, and spittle flew from her mouth.

The blade fell from Celest's hand. Mary Eunice clutched it between her fingers and retreated, scooting backward. She bumped into Lana from behind. As Celest rose, Mary Eunice proffered the blade like a sword. "Go." The word trembled. Anxiety shivered through her whole body, even her tongue. Celest peered over them; she drunkenly rose to her knees and staggered to her feet. Terrified breath caught in Mary Eunice's chest. Lana's hands settled on her shoulders, providing some marginal strength, enough for her to maintain her conviction as she spoke. "Leave. Don't come back. I don't want to see you again."

Her fingers turned white at the knuckles where she clutched the razor. Celest lifted her bloodied face and swung around. She moved in long, limping strides away from the house, down the street, and out of sight. The late afternoon sun hung low in the sky, and the cold breeze whistled over their shivering, sweaty bodies. Lana's hand tightened where it gripped her shoulder. "We—We need to go inside." She gulped audibly. She had never heard Lana sound so uncertain, so
Standing from the grass took enough effort to move a mountain, but Mary Eunice managed, clumsy and tottering. She offered her open hands to Lana; they clasped. Lana fumbled to her feet. Blood trickled down her left arm in narrow streams, rolling to the underside and dripping into the grass. Mary Eunice followed another welling bead with her gaze. *She saved me.* It astonished her. *It shouldn't. She's been saving you since you got here.* She blinked once to clear the fuzz from her mind, and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth as she mumbled in response, "Right."

She picked up the bag of pot from where it had fallen in the lawn. It crinkled in her hand. Lana took her by the wrist and tugged her back up the steps to the porch. Gus waited behind the screen door, staring at them; he wiggled and jumped when they opened it and entered. The scent of blood distressed him. He tried to balance on his hind legs and examine Lana's injured arm, tongue flailing to clean the wound, but she folded it out of his reach. Mary Eunice dropped the bag and blade on the end table of the couch. *Focus. Think. You need your head.* Her mind wanted to split in many different directions, regretting what she had done to Celest, regretting her naive decision to try and talk her way out of it, fearing Lana's rebuke. *Take care of her first.*

With that thought, she reached to take Lana's wounded arm and appraised the long cut. She was no stranger to treating razor cuts; Briarcliff had its fair share of incidents, some self-inflicted and some accidental. She led Lana back to the bathroom and took a dry washcloth to press to it, propping the arm up on the counter. "Can you hold that? Press down on it?" Lana obeyed. Tremors ripped through Mary Eunice's hands as she opened the medicine cabinet, seeking the peroxide, vaseline, and gauze. She dropped the bottle of peroxide and tripped over herself to pick it up. Exhaustion cast a film over her eyes and in her mind. Dark red dots dimpled through the white cloth, so she took another washcloth and stuck it over the first one. "You might need stitches," she mumbled.

"That's not happening." Lana's tone left no room for argument, so Mary Eunice quieted, warming a washcloth under the faucet. She wiped away the drying trails of blood on Lana's arm.

The following ten minutes passed in silence until Mary Eunice peeled the bloodied cloth away and poured peroxide over the wound. Lana hissed at the fizzing sensation. "I'm sorry." She wiped at the cut, blood and white bubbles welling together, and covered it in petroleum jelly. "When— When did you have your last tetanus booster?"

With the back of her other hand, Lana wiped her sweaty brow. "Three years ago. I should be fine." She winced as Mary Eunice drew the bandage taut over the cut, and Mary Eunice mumbled another apology, eyebrows knitting together.

Lana looked up at her face, the careful way Mary Eunice avoided her gaze, the tremble punctuating her movement, the bobbing of her bruised throat when she gulped. She rinsed the washcloth in the sink, and then she squatted in front of Lana; she caught Lana by the chin and swabbed at her face, swathing at the swollen bit of her lip and the drying trickle of blood out of her nose. Lana touched her wrist. She tensed like an animal waiting to be struck. "Hey," Lana addressed, quiet. "Are you okay?"

Mary Eunice bobbed her head, slow; her eyes dropped down to Lana's lap. "Yeah." The single syllable stung Lana's innards. *She's lying.* "I'm fine." She began to withdraw her hand, but Lana clutched it, wanting to press for the truth. At the insistent tug, she cleared her throat. "Do you want some ice for your knuckles?"

"No." Lana glanced down at her scraped, bruised hand; the knuckles had begun to swell, and she flexed them. Pain stung through her hand. "Those are well-earned." She stood, and Mary Eunice
attempted to worry over her. Lana let the hands flutter about her like anxious butterflies without their swarm. "Are you hurt?" Mary Eunice shook her head. Is she lying about that, too? Lana didn't know whether she trusted Mary Eunice to tell the truth, not after she had nearly had her throat slashed and been strangled by the woman who raised her. Give her time. "Come with me. Come on."

She squeezed the wrist in her grasp, and Mary Eunice slipped her hand into Lana's with a soft sigh through her nose. That's better. Lana rubbed her thumb into the soft part of Mary Eunice's palm, and she took the hairbrush from the dresser before she led her back up the hallway to the couch; Gus followed them with anxious wags of his tail, and when they sank onto the couch, he scrambled up to join them. He flapped his tongue onto Mary Eunice's face.

Lana touched her on the shoulder; the muscles beneath her hand tensed. "I'm not going to hurt you," she assured. The urge to wrap Mary Eunice in a tight hug and hold her blossomed inside Lana's chest. She fought to stifle it. You can't do that while she's like this. You'll only scare her. "Turn around. Let me brush your hair." Her arms ached with the effort of moving them, her cut smarting, but she gathered up Mary Eunice's long blonde locks without a second thought.

Combing through her tangles, Lana picked out the twigs and leaves from where Mary Eunice had fallen off of the porch into the bushes. When her hand brushed too firmly against Mary Eunice's back, she tensed. A frown troubled her lips, and she lifted the hem of Mary Eunice's shirt to look at her back. Deep red marks lined her pale skin, some shaped like hand-prints and fists, others blots where she had landed on the ground when she fell. Those are going to bruise. As Mary Eunice fidgeted, she let the shirt fall and continued to brush through her golden tresses. Mary Eunice toyed with Gus's ears, and he rested his head in her lap, his tongue sponging across her hands.

Once the bristles ran clean through Mary Eunice's hair, Lana put the brush aside. "Where's your mind, sunshine?" Mary Eunice shifted, turning back to look at her; she held that self-loathing expression again, troubling her lips and staining her eyes with guilt. Lana took her hand. "Do you want me to hug you?"

Mary Eunice nodded, and as Lana opened her arms, she crawled into the embrace, eyes shut tight. A whimper bloomed in her throat, the sound similar to Gus's cry but muffled. "I'm sorry," she said again. "I didn't mean for her to hurt you—I didn't know she was like that—"

"I know." Lana's abdomen twinged with pain, sore at her surgical site. She pushed it out of her mind and shifted Mary Eunice against her, holding tight; they smelled like sweat and blood and fear, and each fearful tremble through Mary Eunice's body made her smooth her hands up and down her back. If you had listened to me when I said we should call the cops... She bit back the bitter insult. "I knew what I was doing." It was only a partial truth; she had, at one point, lost herself when she saw Celest on top of Mary Eunice, hands around her throat, and her vision blurred crimson, and she snatched out of the fury only when Mary Eunice pulled her away.

A heavy sigh fluttered from between swollen, pink lips, moist where her tongue kept flitting over them. "I really thought she would listen to me—she was right. I've always been stupid."

"You're not stupid." Lana had to rip her gaze off of those lips. "Maybe you weren't good at math in school or never read the dictionary cover to cover, but god, you're smart. You've got an incredible memory; you've got a bible verse at the top of your head for any situation; you've got more recipes in your head than I do words. And you're clever—you're funny!" Having raised her voice, Lana fought to soften it, but her convictions clutched her vocal cords. "She was saying hateful things to hurt you and manipulate you. She's an addict. She'll say anything, do anything, to get her next fix."
"And I know that, I know it, I saw her become that way—" Mary Eunice's voice shook, and she cut herself off until she could hold it steady. She didn't weep. The afternoon had drained her too much to warrant tears. "I should never have thought I could talk her out of it. That was stupid." She picked at the skin of her left arm with the jagged fingernails on her right hand until Lana batted her hands, dissuading her.

"Sometimes we do stupid things for the people we love." Mary Eunice gave her a withering look, mingled sadness trying to grow into a smile. "Sometimes we'll even punch the ever-loving shit out of a sad old whore in our yard." The quip elicited a soft chuckle from Mary Eunice, tears still gathering in the corners of her eyes. Lana's own smile grew in response to the weak laugh, her small accomplishment. It was worth every punch, she wanted to say, I would do it again and again for you. But she didn't tell those revealing things. She brushed her hand through the soft golden hair once more, and she ignored the twinge of pain in her abdomen when Mary Eunice pressed her cheek against her shoulder, tired eyes drooping. "I've got you," Lana promised, quiet as she looped her arms around the narrow waist. Blue eyes flicked up to hers, an acknowledgment, before she settled once again, and they held each other as the evening stretched onward outside.
Thursday passed in peace and quiet; Mary Eunice tended her chores and spent the evening knitting, finishing the scarf Wendy had begun (Lana explained that Wendy had liked to make gloves, hats, and scarves for her low-income students) with care in every stitch, while Lana delivered her column to the newspaper office and finished another chapter of her book. They retired late after Lana found *Singin’ in the Rain* on the television, and they each fell asleep with ease.

The bright ringing of the telephone stirred Mary Eunice from her sleep; sunlight had not yet begun to stream through the bedroom. She squinted at the clock, which read only a few minutes after five. *Maybe it's for one of the neighbors.* She dropped her head back onto the pillow and ignored it. Beside her, Lana sprawled out on her stomach, a bit of drool dribbling out of the corner of her mouth. The bell hadn't disturbed her. Tugging up the covers, Mary Eunice shielded herself from the chill permeating the rest of the house.

With eyes closed tight, she floated in the thickness of a sleepy haze. Lana's breath wafted in a cool breeze across her face; it smelled like morning breath, and she smiled at the notion. *Wonder what it tastes like.* Mary Eunice licked her lips and yawned. Sleep tinged her mind and threatened to reclaim her. She awaited the embrace expectantly.

The telephone bell interrupted her thoughts once more. She groaned, and she drew her hands up from under the blankets, taking Lana by the shoulder. *I don't want to bother her. She doesn't sleep well. And she's so cute when she sleeps.* At the final thought, Lana's stomach gargled aloud, and she passed gas. The sound made Gus lift his head from where he lay at the foot of the bed, perking his ears. Mary Eunice covered her mouth with her hand to stifle the giggles shaking through her chest.

Once she trusted her voice to hold steady, she tugged on Lana's shoulder. "Lana?" she whispered, nudging her. "Hey, Lana. Wake up, cupcake." *Cupcake?* Mary Eunice's face burned when she realized she had said the word aloud; she had called Molly that term of endearment, often to irritate her, many years ago. "Lana."

Lana drawled a long snore and drew under the covers, a turtle retreating into her shell. She moaned. Her face screwed up in protest, and her eyes didn't open. Mary Eunice repeated her name, this time more softly, until Lana mumbled, "What do you want?" She squinted up at her. "Hell, what time—" The bell shrilled again, and her lips drew downward at the corners. "Is that the phone? It's the middle of the night!"

"It's the second time they've called." Mary Eunice rubbed her eyes with her fists as the bell died again. "It might be something important."

"Maybe they won't call back." Lana rolled onto her back and glared up at the ceiling. "It's too early for this." She lifted one arm, grabbing Mary Eunice by the wrist. "Come here. It's freezing. Why is it so cold?" Mary Eunice slithered down beside her, obedient, and Lana wrapped an arm around her middle. "I hope the furnace didn't go out."
"I turned it down before we went to bed."

Lana blinked up at Mary Eunice's silhouette in the darkness. The gray light from the window caught in her messy golden hair, giving her an ethereal glow. *She's so beautiful.* The crinkles beside her eyes, the upward curl of her lips, granted her a soft look. Hours before, Lana had woken to find her quivering in a nightmare, and she managed to calm her without waking her by stroking her hair; now, the temptation rose to ask if she remembered the dream. *Has she dreamed of me again?* She knew Mary Eunice would approach her if she wanted to talk about her dreams, but she was probed by insatiable curiosity. *Another dream of Eden, perhaps?*

All those things considered, she nestled into the pillows, warmed by the innate heat of another body beside her. "Did you sleep well?" Mary Eunice hummed in agreement; her smile didn't ebb, so Lana trusted it. "Good." She smoothed her hand over the squishy part of Mary Eunice's stomach. Through the fabric, the muscles tensed against her palm. *She's ticklish, you fool.* "Sorry."

Rousing from the bed, Lana retreated deep into her nightgown until she reached the thermostat and bumped the temperature up a few degrees. Then, she trotted into the office, muttering under her breath, "Coming, I'm coming." She dropped into the office chair and picked up the phone. "Eastside 7-7387."

Barb's voice crackled over the line, an exhausted croak. "Lana? It's Barb. I'm sorry for calling so early." A thin wail rose in the background, and Lana straightened in her seat, heart skipping beats at the sound. "Something happened on Lois's trip with her dad, I don't know what, she's a mess—god, she won't stop crying—I had to go pick her up from the police station in Portland."

She paused, and Lana heard her shush Lois's muted crying with words of comfort. "What happened? Is she hurt? Is she okay?" The hair on the back of her neck stood up when Mary Eunice's gaze landed upon her, and she turned in her chair to face her. All sleepiness fled her expression, everything alert.

"She's, um, she's in one piece. She's a little roughed up. I've got a loose picture of what happened, really, but it's a long story. Hush, baby, it's okay. I'm here, sugar, I'm just talking to Lana—oh, god, Lana, I'm sorry, but I've got to get to work. I can't miss again; I'll lose my job." Barb sighed, heavy and weary. "Please, could I bring her to you? I can't leave her alone like this, and I don't know who else to call…"

"Yes—Yes, of course. Bring her here. We'll take care of her." At Mary Eunice's furrowed brow, Lana mouthed, "Lois," before she tuned back in to Barb's babbling explanations and tired slurs. "Barb—listen, it's fine. You can call us over your lunch. She'll be okay."

Barb yawned. "Mm—um, sorry—is Wendy okay with it?" She paused a moment before she reconsidered her words. "Ah—fuck. I didn't mean that, I'm sorry."

"Have you been drinking?"

"No! I just haven't slept in, like, two days—It's a long drive to Portland. I really am sorry, I didn't mean it. Uh, but, the nun—"

With a sigh, Lana shoveled her hand through her tangled hair. "She doesn't care." She crossed her legs in front of her and stretched them out; her knees cracked audibly. Mary Eunice murmured something about getting a pot of coffee started and shuffled out of the office. "Are you sure you're safe to work? If you give someone the wrong drug, you'll be facing a lot more than finding a new job."
"I'm fine," Barb assured. "We'll be there in fifteen minutes. Thanks, Mom—Lana—fuck." The line died before Lana could question her. She must be ready to keel over. She wiped her eyes with her palm, picking the crunchy bits out of their corners with her index finger. Maybe Lois will be tired, and we'll all get to go back to sleep.

As she left the office, Mary Eunice passed her, heading up the hallway to the kitchen; she had clothed herself in a blue turtleneck and her sewn skirt, and her hands worked on twining her hair into a braid, rubber band clutched in her mouth. How does she motivate herself so quickly? Lana trailed after her where she had filled the coffee pot. "Something happened to Lois. She's upset. Barb doesn't want to leave her home alone, so she's coming here."

"Okay. Does she like oatmeal?" The ease with which Mary Eunice accepted it soothed Lana's spirit. She nodded in response. A frown troubled her lips when she reached for the oats in the cabinet overhead. "Do you know what happened? Is she okay?"

Leaning against the counter, Lana shook her head. "No, I—don't know. Barb wasn't able to tell me." She pinched the bridge of her nose. Barb isn't the type to lose her head like this. Of their clustered group, Barb had always been the strongest, the most forthright and confident out of their group of friends. For something to have shaken her, Lana didn't want to think of how long she had worked on comforting Lois, how horribly Lois must have been handling her situation. "It's not like her to get so upset."

Mary Eunice measured some water, poured it into a pot, and heated it on the stove. The burner flicked on, and she faced Lana; as Lana mopped her hand over her face, Mary Eunice touched her shoulder, a dry hand pressing there. I love that. Lana placed her own hand on top of it. "It can't be anything that a good breakfast and a few episodes of I Love Lucy can't fix."

A snort passed through Lana's nose in spite of herself. She squeezed Mary Eunice's hand, lifted it and clutched their fingers together. "What makes you say that?"

"If it were something really horrible, it would've happened to you instead." At her blunt words, Lana burst out laughing; the tension building inside her chest dissipated in the nervous, tired laughter, bordering on hysteria. Mary Eunice turned to watch the pot of water; as it bloomed into a boil, she poured in the oats. She stole a glance at Lana through the corner of her eye, and her lips curled upward at their edges. "You're a magnet for bad luck," she teased.

Lana's arms acted of their own accord as they wreathed around Mary Eunice's waist, cinched around her middle. She bounced on her tiptoes to see over her shoulder, and she rested her chin there, lips right at Mary Eunice's cheek. Mary Eunice giggled at the playful closeness. As she turned her head, Lana kissed her cheek, eliciting another cute giggle; the sweetness of the sound made Lana suck in a sharp breath. "Maybe you should stay away, then. Something horrible might happen to you." The dark sensuality of her own voice surprised her; she reconsidered her words, heart sinking into the pit of her stomach, even as Mary Eunice's laughter persisted. What am I doing? Flirting with her?

Mary Eunice's skin flushed a tickled pink shade, and she had to fight to calm her gentle laughter. "Don't be silly." Good, she didn't notice. "I think you're worth any collateral damage." Or she doesn't mind. Lana wasn't certain which one of those options she preferred. She grazed her fingers over the squish of Mary Eunice's tummy; the muscles underneath tightened as she doubled over, bursting into another fit of giggles. Her nose ran, and she sniffled, wiping it with the back of her hand. "Lana! You're going to make me spill our breakfast!" She hiccuped the words between her gasps for breath and laughter brighter than the sun in the sky. "Stop it!" Her body wriggled against Lana's in the softest way.

I miss this so much. The pang of regret wriggled through Lana's stomach, heavy and hard as a
stone; she craved the intimacy she found only under the covers late at night, wrapped deep in the embrace of a woman who could never love her. No amount of erotic dreams indicated Mary Eunice's feelings for her. I've confused her. Living with me is challenging everything she knows. Her brain is working through it the only way it knows how. Lana knew that well. She had endured the same dreams, ones of Wendy, long ago, reflecting upon them as she dressed herself and rushed to meet her boyfriend, dodging his kisses and not looking into his eyes when she told him she loved him. No, Mary Eunice could never be Lana's. And I can never have someone else. As much as she craved and missed the closeness, no one would give it the way Wendy had given it. Anyone else would make only a pale imitation, and the thought of welcoming someone else in the same bed where she and Wendy had made love sickened her stomach. She was doomed to live alone in her misery, living just because she had fought so damn hard for it; she couldn't possibly give up now, not after she had come so far and lost so much.

"Lana?" She blinked up at Mary Eunice at the quiet address. "Are you alright?" She held Mary Eunice at arm's length, gazing at her as her own thoughts consumed her.

She nodded, and she blinked a few times to clear her mind. "Yeah—Yeah, I'm fine." Mary Eunice smiled, lingering upon her like she doubted Lana's words, and Lana shuffled forward to hug her, meek and chaste. The sweet, heavy scent like rain clung to her hair. In it, Lana lost all of her troubles. The touch pressed love into her body, the sheer adoration Mary Eunice held for her streaming into all of the pores of her skin. Retreating from it stung Lana's insides. "I'm going to get dressed. Let them in for me if they get here?"

Mary Eunice nodded her agreement, and Lana left the kitchen; in her wake, she stirred the pot of oatmeal and added cinnamon and sugar. The scent of it wafted around the kitchen and into the house. It wafted into her nostrils, and as she inhaled, it brought a sense of safety. She couldn't remember why it made her feel that way. It had for as long as her memory stretched; the smell of cooking oatmeal and cinnamon brought to mind any place she felt safe. Boiling it in Lana's kitchen was fitting, like curling up beside her and settling in her love.

The doorbell rang. Gus straightened at the sound and bellowed a few warning barks, but as Mary Eunice passed, she shushed him, and he fell into obedient silence. She glanced down at him, ready to restrain him if he acted aggressively, but he curled back up on the rug in front of the television, resting a paw on his muzzle. Behind the door in the gray dawn light, Barb and Lois stood. Barb wore full scrubs, her coat draped over Lois's shoulders, one hand smoothing up and down her back; Lois shuddered in the chill, her red-streaked face shivering where she smeared away her tears with the backs of her hands.

Mary Eunice opened the door to them. "Come inside," she invited, a soft smile touching her face. Lois flung arms around her in a tight hug, sending Mary Eunice staggering with her force. "Thank you!" Her face was sticky from tears and snot. The sudden attack sent her heart galloping away, but Lois's body was soft and pleasant; she smelled like lilacs. She returned the embrace, hesitant at first, but then with more fervor as Lois quivered with tears. Her words were unintelligible through the muffled sobs, and Mary Eunice tightened her arms around her waist.

Rubbing her eyes with her fists, Barb shuffled into the home after her. "Tag," she said, eyes squinted with exhaustion. "You're it." She scanned Mary Eunice once, but the predatory appeal she had held at their last meeting had vanished. "Where's Lana?"

"She's getting dressed. Do you, um—" Lois didn't let go as she sagged against Mary Eunice's body. "Do you want some coffee? It's in the kitchen." She struggled to hold Lois upright and shuffled to put her on the couch; she wrapped her in the throw. Barb nodded and walked past, a distinct limp punctuating her gait. In her absence, Mary Eunice wriggled to free herself from Lois's tight grasp. "Hey—do you want some oatmeal?" Lois shook her head, and one of her arms
grappled for Mary Eunice's waist again, pleading for another hug. She's so upset. Mary Eunice provided a second embrace, this one slower and softer. "It's going to be okay," she promised, uncertain if she spoke the truth or not. What could've happened to her?

Barb clutched a mug of coffee as she left the kitchen. "I've got to go—" She stopped in front of Lois, crouched down in front of her, and Lois straightened in response, pulling away from Mary Eunice and sniffing. Barb's tired eyes crinkled into a soothing smile. She plucked a handkerchief from her back pocket. "Here, baby. Lana and Mary Eunice are going to take care of you." Lois nodded. The line of her mouth shivered as she tried and failed to form a smile in response to her partner's. "Good girl. I love you."

"I love you, too." Lois's broken whisper shivered as she took the handkerchief. She blew her nose and wiped her face before she leaned in, and they shared a quick kiss.

Pushing herself up, Barb glanced to Mary Eunice. "Take care of her." Mary Eunice nodded, giving her promise, and Barb grinned. "Thanks for the coffee." She waved as she left the house, leaving Lois to flop against Mary Eunice again, her spine and smile dissolving together.

Her soft red hair fell into Mary Eunice's lap, and she smoothed her hand over its tangles; it hadn't been combed in several hours by the look of it. I wish I had a brush. She twirled a lock around her index finger. Lois didn't start crying again. "I'm sorry," she whispered instead, eyes downcast. "I didn't mean to freak out on you. I swear, I—I'm not usually like this." Her voice shivered, thin and weak, as she dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief.

"It's fine," Mary Eunice assured. "I really don't mind." Lois leaned against her, head resting on her shoulder with her eyelids drooping. "Are you sure you don't want anything? A cup of coffee?"

Drowsing, Lois blinked hard a few times. "Uh—right." She pushed herself up. "I'm sorry," she said again, wiping her eyes with her fists. "I know I should eat something, but I just feel like shit—" The quiver punctuated her voice, and she swallowed hard to steady it. It's alright, Mary Eunice wanted to reassure her, you don't have to tell me anything. But she waited patiently for Lois to finish speaking. "I don't ever want to eat again. I just feel sick to my stomach."

Up the hall, Lana headed toward them, her hair pulled back out of her face. "Hey." Her voice had a soft tone to it, and she sank onto the couch on the other side of Lois, facing her with her legs and feet gathered up underneath her. "What's up?" Lois sniffled, wiping her nose with the handkerchief. "C'mon, lay it on us. We're all ears. Do I want to know? Anxiety prickled in Mary Eunice's chest. Did Lois even want to talk to her? She was still practically a stranger. Should I offer to leave? She bit the tip of her tongue as Lana nudged Lois pointedly.

Lois wriggled and leaned against Mary Eunice again, propping her body up against her. "Oh—I'm sorry, I don't mean to lay on you—"

"It's fine. I'm hug-friendly."

"Oh, thank god. I need it—oh my god, is that a dog? Lana? You got a dog?"

At the squeal of attention, Gus lifted his head from where he lay in front of the television. He pricked his ears and turned to look at them. "You could say we got a dog, but it might be more accurate to say he got us," Lana said, inclining her eyebrows. "Come here, Gus. Come here!" He rolled to his paws at the summons and lumbered over to them.

He butted his large head against Mary Eunice's knees. "Can I pet him?" They both nodded, and Lois extended her hand slowly. Gus sniffed in a brief inspection, and then he licked her fingertips. A smile cracked across her face, weepy and watery but still present. "Gus. That's a cute name."
She dabbed at her eyes with her forefingers. "I always said, a long time ago, I would name my first son Gus—Augustus, for my father." Her face crumpled again, and she repeated, "My daddy," in a cracked tone.

Gus whined and sat down in front of her, allowing her to toy with his ears; in her other hand, she balled up the handkerchief and squeezed it. Mary Eunice and Lana moved at the same time. They both reached to hug her, and their arms interlocked as they did it. Behind Lois's head, Lana caught Mary Eunice's eye, and she flashed a quick smile. *She looks so nice.* Her heart skipped a beat at the beautiful curl of Lana's lips, but her words pulled her from her reverie. "Tell us what happened, sweetie."

"Oh, dear. I, um, I was just really stupid." Lois sniffled, voice cracking as she worked through her words. "I went with my daddy and brother, Bob, out to the cabin—a few miles outside of Portland. We just, we were just hanging out, drinking, listening to the radio. And it was pretty late, already dark outside, and Bobby asks me if he can have a buck to pick us up some cigarettes from the corner store before it closed. I say, 'Yeah, sure, whatever,' and I throw him my purse."

She broke off there, and Mary Eunice rubbed a hand up and down her back, feeling the flat plains underneath, the shapes of the muscles and fat and skin. Lois tilted her head and rested it on Mary Eunice's shoulder, eyes closed tight. "I wasn't thinking—I should've just given him a dollar—god, I was drunk. I was such an *idiot.*"

As Lois pinched the bridge of her nose, everything gnarled in regret, Lana reached the inevitable conclusion. "You had a picture of Barb in your wallet, didn't you?"

Lois hiccuped. She nodded through her sob. "Nobody's ever in my purse but me and Barb. I just like to have a piece of her with me—it makes it easier to get through the day, sometimes, when we're both at work—and I have to flirt with my boss—sometimes it helps just to be able to look at her and know she'll be there when I get home." Mary Eunice's heart wrenched in her chest. *She loves Barb so much.* The sheer love of it overwhelmed her, carrying a piece of another person, the way she carried the rosary Lana had given her and cherished it.

"I know," Lana answered. "I have one of Wendy in mine." The quick smile she had flashed earlier had vanished completely, replaced by the sorrow drawing her lips downward at the corners.

A vague sound, mingled snort and hiccup, rose from Lois. "I bet Wendy isn't buck naked in your picture."

*Oh dear.* Mary Eunice's face flushed at the sharp words, while Lana echoed her sentiments, muttering, "Oh, shit," under her breath.

A sob shuddered through Lois's shoulders, and while she didn't cry out, the anguish distorted her face almost beyond recognition. A thin mewl built in the base of her throat. She managed to stifle it. "He just held the picture up to the light, and after he looked at it a minute, he looked back over at me, and he said, 'What's this?' My heart just fell out of chest when I realized, and I didn't know what to say—what could I say? I told him it was Barb, and he said—" She swallowed hard, distress quivering in her every breath. "He said, 'What, you some kind of queer or something?'

Exhaling a long sigh, Lana took Lois's hand. "Oh, Lois, I'm so sorry."

Lois squeezed her hand in return, shaking her head against Mary Eunice's shoulder where it rested. "I tried to shut him up, but he—he wouldn't give it back to me. He hollered for Daddy, and then all hell broke loose. It all hit the fan. Daddy had his shotgun and he just kept shouting, 'Are you a dyke or aren't you?' and finally I said, 'Yeah, Daddy, I guess I am.'" Gus rested his head in
her lap and whimpered until she scratched the top of his head again, long fingernails combing over the smooth black fur. But she didn't glance down at him; she dragged her fingers over him mindlessly. "He yelled for me to get out—get out and not come back."

Her words trembled like a leaf clinging to a branch in a strong breeze. "He said, 'Get out before I blow your fucking brains out,' and then he said he'd rather be a murderer than the father of a faggot—" She choked on her words. Lana tugged the handkerchief out of her hand and dabbed at the tears sliding down her cheeks; she pursed her lips in displeasure, but she didn't interrupt Lois from speaking. This isn't right, Mary Eunice thought, biting her tongue to maintain her composure. Why are families like this? Why isn't love unconditional? That's how it should be. "And then he told me I would never see Barb again if I didn't get out of his sight—I just looked at Bobby, but he looked the most hateful I'd ever seen him. He threw my purse back at me. Didn't say anything—he didn't say anything at all."

The tears wet the front of Mary Eunice's soft sweater, and she smoothed her hand up and down the plains of her back; she knew no other comfort to provide. There is no comfort. Nothing could ease the loss of family. Her heart gave an agonizing throb. "I didn't have a choice, I just ran, I didn't know what else to do—I wasn't even wearing any shoes." Another long sniff drew out. "I —I walked out to the highway. I thought maybe somebody would come by and give me a ride back to town, but—but then I remembered what happened to you, and I decided maybe it was better just to walk—I didn't want to get killed."

Lana inclined her eyebrows and didn't answer. "So I did. It was six miles back into town, I kept stepping in glass and shit, it was so cold, the sun was starting to come up by the time I made it to the gas station. There was this old woman there, pumping her gas, and she drove me to the police station—and then I asked them to call Barb." She reached for Mary Eunice's hand, and Mary Eunice took it, clutching tightly. Another broken sob shook Lois. Her following words were unintelligible, garbled by her distress.

When her wail quieted into a thin, distressed mewl, Lana wiped her face again. "I know you probably don't want to hear this right now," she murmured, "but this isn't the end of the world." Lois's big brown eyes found Lana's, all things vulnerable and innocent and aching. Mary Eunice plucked her lip between her lower teeth. She had never asked how Lana had severed from her family, but Lana held that wise, knowing look, the quirk to her lips and the sad but assured glimmer in her eyes which told of her experience. "It really isn't. I promise. I know it hurts like all hell right now, and it's going to hurt like a bitch for a long time, but one day—one day, you'll be with Barb, and you'll look back on this and think how much better it is this way."

"How can you say that?" Lois's eyes shimmered with a layer of tears on their surface, swimming. "They're my family—they're everything! Who do I have, if I don't have my family?"

"You have Barb. You have us. You have—hell, name one of our friends who isn't going to be on your side here. You've got the whole world, Lois, really."

"You're right, that was a stupid thing to say." She broke away from Lana's gaze, glancing down to the hands she held in hers. "I hope Barb's okay. I shouldn't have let her go to work. She was so fucked up about everything that happened. I guess I would be, too. If someone treated her like that, I would want to kill them—god, and she wouldn't go to sleep. I don't know why, she just didn't want to, or she was too pissed off. I felt too sick to sleep." She hiccuped. Mary Eunice rolled her thumb over the back of Lois's hands.

*How does Lana do it? How does she make me feel better when I'm upset?* The touching had a lot to do with the comfort Lana provided, but Mary Eunice was uncertain how much Lois wanted to touch her. She smells good. She's soft, and she's pretty. I don't mind touching her. With her other hand, she brushed a lock of Lois's ginger hair out of her eyes and tucked it between her ear. The
tender gesture earned her a flexed attempt at a smile, brown eyes flicking to her, while Lana's fixed upon her with an odd look, something between approval and confusion.

"I don't know how you and Wendy did it, Lana," Lois admitted in a whisper. "I feel like part of me is gone."

A heavy sigh blew from Lana's nose. "We didn't have a choice. You know that." She averted her eyes. *Tell me more. I want to know.* Mary Eunice attempted to stifle the nosy voice wriggling around in her mind, but she craved the knowledge, more pieces of Lana which she could catch and treasure. "Mama caught me with my face between Wendy's legs. You don't come back from that."

"She always said that was the most awkward orgasm she ever had," Lois sniffed. They both broke out into meek giggles, Lois shifting to prop herself against Mary Eunice. The flush body against hers made her chest warm, and in spite of herself, she smelled Lois's hair again, drinking in the scent of green apples. "But what did you do? I mean, afterward? Where did you go? How did you live every day without wanting to pick up the phone and apologize?"

"Daddy chased us back to our car with his gun. We knew it was just a matter of time before my parents told hers. We knew we weren't safe. So we drove our asses back to Boston like smart people." Mary Eunice noticed how Lana glanced at her as she spoke. Each time Lana's eyes landed on her, her heart warmed. "Wendy struggled more than I did. She wrote this long apology letter and mailed it—neither of our houses had telephones. After a month or so, it was sent back to her in a different envelope. Different stamp." She raised her eyebrows as she inhaled, and they sank as the heavy breath flowed from her parted lips. "We got through it. We had each other."

"Oh, Lana, I'm sorry." The final words stung Mary Eunice's insides, the utter heartbreak attached to them; where Lana had once had Wendy, she now had no one. *That's a sentence no one should ever say in the past tense.*

But Lana interrupted her curling, grieving thoughts. "You have Barb. She would cut off her own legs if it made you happy. You're her moon and all her stars. You've got to talk to her. She'll have your back every step of the way." Mary Eunice's body, squelching in her innards. *Is that how Lana felt about Wendy?* Her grip on Lois's hand tightened at the prospect. *That's how I feel about Lana.* The notion struck her as odd, how her feelings for Lana overwhelmed her and set the world ablaze with light like the full moon in the clear night sky. *Am I supposed to feel like that?*

Lois nodded, mumbling some vague agreement, and Mary Eunice fought to focus. *Stop wandering off in your own head. Of course you can feel like that. There's nothing wrong with loving your friends.* "I just worry about her," Lois admitted. "I know it's silly. She's got all her ducks in a row, and I don't even have ducks. I've got these rogue squirrels that like to head into the trees when I try to organize them. And there's nothing to worry for. She loves her job, and she loves me. I know that."

In her quietest voice, Mary Eunice provided, "Sometimes we worry about the people we love, even for no good reason. It just means we care." Lana and Lois both fixed their gazes upon her, and nervousness prickled in her chest, wondering if she had told too much. "You're allowed to worry. It's not a bad thing."

"That's right," Lana said. "I would be more concerned if you weren't worried at all." A loud stomach gargled between them, and Mary Eunice's and Lana's eyes widened in synchronization; a telling blush crawled over Lois's face. "C'mon. We all need to eat breakfast. Your stomach will feel better once you put something in it."

They ate the burned oatmeal in near silence, Lois and Lana occasionally making remarks while
Mary Eunice stared into the mush, savoring the scent of cinnamon and apples and the pleasant waves it sent through her intestines. The sound of Lana's voice topped with oatmeal sent her mind settling somewhere comfortable and safe within itself, relaxed all of her nerves and internal troubles. *I love her so much.* "Sister?" The title drew her attention up to Lana, and she beamed at her, too dreamy and too bright; Lois quirked her eyebrows at the sight of it.

Lana gaped at her, caught in the moment with her mouth open, a stricken look freezing in her eyes, until Mary Eunice broke from her reverie and stammered, "Yes?" *Get your head out of the clouds. You're still half-asleep. She's your friend.*

With a cough, Lana cleared her throat, and she nodded to the pot of coffee. "Do you want some?"

"Oh—no, thank you." Mary Eunice sipped her apple juice, feeling quite childish.

Arching an eyebrow, Lana pressed, "Is coffee an indulgence?" in her teasing tone, eyes narrowed with her genuine smile.

"No, I just think it's gross." Lana chuckled as she sipped from her mug, the steam curling off of it and around her nostrils; the associated bitter flavor, its memory, didn't sting her tongue as much when she imagined it clinging to Lana's lips and tongue, the sweet scent upon her breath.

Lois also didn't indulge in any coffee, but she heaved through a heavy sigh, and she rubbed her eyes with her fists, picking the crust out of their corners with her index fingers. Mary Eunice collected their empty dishes and scraped them out and then set to washing them; Gus followed her around, whining for scraps, once he had finished his own meal. "Hey—" For a moment, Mary Eunice thought Lana spoke to her, but as she glanced over her shoulder, she found Lana gazing at Lois instead. "You can sleep in our bed if you want." *Our bed.* "I know you were up all night. You've got to be exhausted."

"Oh—I really couldn't." Lois fidgeted, kicking her legs under the table. "I don't want to be alone right now," she admitted in a soft afterthought. "I just know I would have some, some awful dream, or something."

*I don't want to be alone.* Mary Eunice remembered those words from the first time she had spoken them, a plea for Lana not to leave her by herself, when her vision still crawled with specters and crooked, soulless figures, things which now only returned in the dead of the night or when her mind blurred in a sleepy haze. *None of us want to be alone.* "I'll stay with you," she offered Lois, drying the last of their dirty plates. "You should get some rest."

Lana seconded, "She's right. You look exhausted." At her blunt statement, Lois chuckled, muttering something about being flattered under her breath; Lana ignored her and whistled for Gus to come outside with her.

Once the front door slammed closed, a gust of chilly, late October wind gushing in its wake, silence consumed the home. Mary Eunice hummed as she tucked away the clean dishes in their assigned locations. Lois stared down at her lap, not having risen from the kitchen table yet. Her puffy eyes had dark circles beneath them, and she wiped her dripping nose with the back of her hand. "Hey." Mary Eunice tiptoed beside her. She hesitated for a moment, and then she rested one light hand on Lois's left shoulder. It drew Lois's head upright as she turned back to look at her, brown eyes still teary. *Her eyes are lighter than Lana's.* "I'm serious. I'll stay with you." With a momentary pause, she plucked her lower lip between her teeth, gazing into the golden-brown depths; something from behind her navel grabbed and pulled. "I—I know what it's like to be afraid of what you'll see in your dreams."

A single tear slipped from Lois's eyes, and Mary Eunice squelched the urge to catch it and wipe it
away like she would have for Lana. "Thank you."

Settling in bed beside her felt odd but not uncomfortable; Mary Eunice sat on Lana's side of the bed with the loom she had uncovered from the depths of the closet, spinning out the beginnings of a knit cap. Lois curled up on the other side beneath the covers, cheek pressed into the pillow, gazing up at her. The distance between them had no cracking tension. I don't want to hold her like I do with Lana. As Mary Eunice spun out a few more stitches, thoughtful in her silence, she considered, But I'm better friends with Lana. That makes sense. Her stomach pricked, a nagging feeling of doubt. Right? I'm friends with Lana. That's all. It just feels weird because I've never really had friends before. I used to want to hold the kids. It's the same thing.

It wasn't the same thing. She couldn't explain it, but she felt something different for Lana, something inexplicable and new. Her fingers continued to spin mindless patterns with the needles and yarn; occasionally, they tripped from the years of going unused, and she had to redo her patterns. A long, heavy breath drew from Lois's nose, similar to a snore. It interrupted Mary Eunice's thoughts. She glanced down where Lois rested, eyes closed, red hair strewn out on top of the covers.

As thoughtless as the patterns drawn by her fingers in the yarn, Mary Eunice reached and tucked a lock of the hair behind her ear. The brown eyes fluttered and peered up at her. Oh no. Stupid stupid stupid. What are you doing? "Sorry." She withdrew her hand, cheeks warming. "I, uh, I thought you were asleep."

Eyebrows quirking, Lois grinned at her, a sleepy crinkle to the corner of her eyes. "It's fine. I don't bite." Mary Eunice returned the smile with a relieved ease. "Do you..." Lois hesitated, thinking, before she pressed the question forward, delicate. "Do you do that to Lana?"

Mary Eunice nodded again. She has soft hair. It always smells like her floral shampoo. It matches her dark eyes. The image came to her mind, Lana laughing, her perfect teeth caught in the light, her eyes sparkling, hair falling back out of her face... The blush heating Mary Eunice's cheeks darkened more when she realized how easily the thoughts consumed her. Oh, stop being stupid. Stop thinking about her. You're not going to forget what she looks like.

"That's sweet," Lois mused. She tugged herself upward and propped herself on her elbow. "Aw, you're blushing. That's so cute!" Her red eyebrows wriggled on her forehead, and Mary Eunice giggled at the suggestive expression. Her needles slipped out of her fingers. She covered her mouth with her hand to stifle her laughter. "I'm so glad Lana has you. You're a real good friend. She deserves someone just like you."

I'm blessed to have her. Mary Eunice dropped her eyes into her lap, uncertain how to respond as she mulled things over, her belly squelching with nervousness. "How do you feel about her?"

The question caught her off-guard, and she whipped her head, to regard Lois, but her expression remained passive and friendly, harboring no enmity or even teasing appeal. Her tongue sponged up all of the saliva in her dry mouth. "I—I love her very much. She is the best friend I've ever had—the finest blessing I've ever received."

Lois hummed, noncommittal. "If I didn't know better, I would say you were in love with her." Mary Eunice's eyes widened. What? No way. We're just friends, good friends, and Lana is very pretty, and she makes me feel happy because that's what friends do. "Oh—don't worry, I'm not making any assumptions. I'm just teasing you," Lois soothed. She rolled onto her back, hair splayed underneath her in a ginger arrangement. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course." Her heart skipped a beat in spite of her affirmation, mind still sputtering at the prospect of being in love with Lana, not just loving her but being in love with her; it skipped like a broken record, ticking on repeat while she fought to work her way out of the notion, to find some
defense she could grasp. She floundered in the prospect. The realness of it pulsed in the hollow parts of her chest, how very right it felt.

"Why are you really here?"

This knocked all of the air out of Mary Eunice's lungs, a punch in her gut. Her tongue twisted around a nervous hedged explanation. "I, er, I'm seeing a faith counselor. My Mother Superior doesn't want to reassign me, given the—the circumstances under which I left Briarcliff."

Pursing her lips, Lois asked, "Why was that? Did it have to do with Lana?"

"No—um, not really." Mary Eunice plucked at the hem of her sleeve, anxiety rearing alive inside of her. "The Monsignor asked Lana if she was willing to offer me shelter for a stipend, because I had nowhere else to go, and I couldn't stay at Briarcliff anymore."

Lois's tactless curiosity drove her onward, well-intentioned but oblivious. "But why not?" Mary Eunice stiffened, taut as a board. I wish you were Lana. At her posture, Lois amended, softer, "You don't have to answer—I don't mean to pry. I'm sure that kind of place isn't easy for anyone. Skeletons in the closets and demons in the hallways." An involuntary shudder passed through her shoulders at the word demon, more vulgar than any swear word where it burned into Mary Eunice's mind. The inhuman voice surfaced with disjointed, haunting bits, incoherent but horrifying in the lost language, Latin curses lost in time. "Hey. Sister?" At the sound of her title, she flinched, startled by the address. "Are you okay?"

The mild expression abandoned Lois's face, replaced by one of intense concern; she sat up and scooted nearer to Mary Eunice. "Y-Yeah, I'm fine." She struggled around the words.

A warm arm curled around her shoulders, plump and dimpled and freckled all the way up the shoulder. "You're shaking." As Lois pointed it out, another quiver wracked its way through her body; her memories never failed to leech the room of all warmth, reducing her to a shivering puddle. She bowed into Lois's tender embrace. "Did someone hurt you?" She shook her head. No, I hurt everyone, no one hurt me, I did it myself. "You don't have to tell me anything. But does Lana know?" She bobbed her head in agreement. "Good. You ought not carry it alone."

The brief chill passed like a ghost in the night, comforted by arms which were not Lana's, and Lois kissed her on the cheek. "You're a real sweetie. You remind me of my sister." A wistful look came to Lois's face, shading her expression, and the distressed lines crinkled once again. "I just realized I'll probably never see her again." Mary Eunice gathered up the blankets and plucked them up, her knitting forgotten as she reached to comfort Lois. "What about you? Did you have any siblings?"

Taken aback, Mary Eunice's eyes widened at the sudden question, but she answered without hesitation. Lois was kind and gentle; they relished in shared naivety. "No, I grew up with my cousins. My parents died when I was young."

Lois gave her a sideways, pitying look, but then she nestled closer, snug as spoons. "We'll be each other's sisters now, okay? Is that okay with you? Soul sisters."

A sister? Mary Eunice considered the prospect, an adoptive sister. "I'd like that," she whispered, uncertain as she put words to her thoughts.

"Alright." A bright smile spread across her face. "We're sisters now. We'll have each other's backs until the end of time. We tell each other secrets and keep each other safe. Pinky swear on it?" She offered her finger in a hooked formation. Mary Eunice caught hers in return, the first time she had ever done it. A whimsical laugh fluttered from Lois's lips. "I think that's the silliest thing I've done
in the last year." Lois reclined on the pillows, one of her arms resting in a loose curl over Mary Eunice's shoulders, stretching her legs before her. "What about you?"

"Um… Lana challenged me to a tickle fight last week."

"Who won?"

"She did."

"Of course she did. She's not the least bit ticklish." Mary Eunice chuckled at the information Lois offered; speaking of Lana brought her to mind again, her beautiful dark eyes and thick brown hair and the sound of her laughter and the sensation of her fingertips dancing across her skin like fairies touching down and floating away once again, bees kissing clovers and pollinating them. *She makes me poetic. She makes me smart.* "Can I ask you something?" Lois asked. "Not as horrible as the last thing, I promise." Mary Eunice faced her, eyes brightening with interest, and nodded. The light kept flickering out of Lois's eyes, no matter how she fought to keep her smile; her family's ordeal had not left her, and she remained troubled. "Is it okay if, um, actually… Do you mind if we pray together?"

Her heart gained wings and soared through the skies of her chest, bright and enthusiastic at the suggestion. She hadn't shared her faith with someone in a long time, not since the quiet moments in the chapel when she knelt with her rosary and Pepper followed and mimicked her, an innocent reach for prayer. The intimacy of prayer shared with a friend filled her with joy. "No, not at all—it's one of the few things in my job description."

They joined one another in the floor, kneeling beside the bed. "I've never prayed a rosary before," Lois admitted.

"You don't have to—you can pray whatever you like—"

"No, no, I want to know. Teach me."

Mary Eunice tugged out her rosary, the string of beads and dangling crucifix. Lana had given her this one, after Gus ate the other one. As she rolled her thumbs over the sacred wooden bits, she wondered if Wendy had prayed with it as well, or if she had kept it without ever using it. "Well, each bit represents a different prayer. The crucifix is the Apostle's Creed." She fingered it as she explained it, toying with it. "Then this string is the Our Father, these three are your first Hail Marys, and this last one is the Glory be to the Father." She moved from the initial string to the circular part of the rosary containing the decade beads. "Then you announce the first mystery and the Our Father, and you pray a decade of Hail Marys during your meditation. Pray Glory be again, and then repeat with the second, third, fourth, and fifth mysteries."

"I know all those but the mysteries."

"It's okay, I know them."

"All of them?" Mary Eunice nodded, frowning at Lois's incredulous look. "Aren't there, like, twenty of them?" She nodded again. "Your brain must be like a Bible archive." She grinned, face flushing at the compliment, but then Lois's fingers teased over hers to brush the crucifix. "You said Apostle's Creed first, right?"

Lana entered the house with Gus ahead of her, tail wagging; she released him from his leash, and he trotted to the water bowl and lapped out of it. "Lois?" She wheeled around, but Lois wasn't at the kitchen table where she had left her, nor did she sit at the sofa. *No, no way.* Her heart plummeted, landing in her stomach and expanding so she could hardly breathe. "Sister?" Her
voice emerged in a faint croak. *It's too quiet.*

Moving on the balls of her feet, Lana peeked into the vacant kitchen. Her pulse thundered in her wrists and throat. "Mary Eunice?" *Someone took them. I have to call Barb. I have to call the police. I have to go find them.* Her head spun, breath hiccupsing in her chest as she sucked for more; a pressure settled on her chest. She couldn't exhale. A wheezing whine budded in her throat. The sound surprised her, and Gus lifted his head from his water bowl, jowls dripping long strings of water. It dribbled into the carpet before he wheeled around and settled in front of the television. He sprawled out, as relaxed as ever. *What's wrong with him? He's supposed to be loyal! They're missing!* The panicked thoughts tripped over themselves just like her clumsy, bothered feet.

Tears sprang to her eyes. It had happened again. She had turned her back for just a moment. In that moment, someone took the only thing she cared about. Pain stabbed into her chest—real pain, ripping like the scalpel across her skin, incomparable to any emotional anguish. Her face and fingers tingled and numbed; she gasped for each breath to replace the former, unable to calm her irrational panic. The thick air tasted like blood and chalk. Her feet carried her to the hallway, where the door hung with just a crack leading to the bedroom—more closed than she and Mary Eunice ever left it. *They weren't kidnapped. They were murdered. They tried to hide in the bedroom and it didn't work. He killed them.*

Her stomach whirled about, convinced of her convictions and threatening to spill everything out of her. Still, her hand fluttered forward and gave a single, firm push to the door. It swung open, revealing the bodies of Mary Eunice and Lois, kneeling in prayer and breathing and murmuring to one another with their beating hearts; with their eyes closed, they did not notice Lana standing there. The tears streamed out of her eyes, hands covering her mouth to catch the scream threatening to burst from her. She spun around and fled from the sight before she disturbed them. *They're fine. They're praying. They're fine. They're not dead. Of course they're not dead. That's stupid. Why am I stupid?*

She crumpled on the couch. The breathlessness didn't fade, and she curled up in a tight ball, blackness dotting her vision. The stabbing pain in her chest persisted. Her extremities numbed and quivered. Her nose and lips and ears had gone completely numb. *Why can't I breathe? I'm choking—I can't be choking—I didn't eat anything!* Nausea feuded with her self-control, which dissolved somewhere in her overwhelming sense of helplessness. A chill shuddered through her. She wrapped the throw around her body, fumbling with her numb hands, while sweat trickled down her legs and stained the armpits of her shirt. *I must be dying.*

Gus sprang onto the couch beside her. His hind legs scrambled to join her. The pink tongue swathed at her tear-stained cheeks. "Nuh-Nuh-No—" Her attempt to dissuade him failed; she was too dizzy to keep her balance, and she flopped backward on the couch. Gus crawled beside her and lay himself on her chest. Hearts pounded against one another, one faster than the other. The pressure warmed her from the chills. "Guh-Guh—" Her jaws chattered against one another. She bit her tongue.

He licked her face, big paws framing her head and tangling in her brown hair. Her heartbeat slowed, not yet normal but closer to it, and she unrolled her hands from the tight fists to grab his ears, studying the velvety texture. The cold, wet nose tickled her pulse point in her neck. Replacing the dizziness in her mind, exhaustion and a dull headache throbbed between her temples. *What the hell was that?* Her quick breaths slowed from the hyperventilating pace to a more solid, manageable pant. "Thuh-Thank you." He nosed right against her and whined. She folded her arms across his broad shoulders, clasping her hands around him. "It's okay," she murmured. "Don't worry about me."
The headache blossomed, encouraging her to close her eyes, and her bunched muscle groups relaxed and seized in rhythmic patterns, body throbbing with the aftermath. *There's something wrong with me.* Gus settled his head on her shoulder. The steady weight on her chest grounded her, weighted her to the earth. *I'm broken. I shouldn't be like this.* Her face bunched up, unable to produce tears. Sleep consumed her without her consent, swallowing her whole.

"Lana?" Mary Eunice's voice brought her from a peaceful blackness. She identified it immediately, but the rest was fuzzy. The soft voice floated above her head. "Are you alright?"

She blinked a few times, squinting up through the haze as her eyes adjusted. "Yeah." The lie came with ease. "I'm fine. Just a little tired." Gus lay in the floor beside the couch. She frowned at him. She hadn't felt him leave her. Her eyes narrowed at him, but she lifted her gaze back to Mary Eunice, shaking herself and fighting for focus. "What—What time is it?"

"It's just after eleven. I was going to ask what you wanted for lunch. Lois is asleep." A quirk appeared between her eyebrows, a frown of worry on her lips. "Are you sure you're fine?"

"Yes!" she insisted, too quickly, too vehemently, and Mary Eunice took a step back, startled at the volume of her voice. Lana pushed herself up. *Don't shout at her, you fool."* Sorry. I'm fine," she repeated, dipping her head to measure her voice. "I'll—I'll help you. Let's make, uh, let's make some chicken and noodles." As she stood, the world spun, but she held herself upright by clutching the arm of the couch.

It didn't escape Mary Eunice's notice. "It's okay, I can do it—" Lana shook her head. *I can't be alone right now.* The anxiety surged back into her throat, irrational fears soothed by Mary Eunice's presence but still convinced she could vanish in an instant. "Do you feel well?"

For the third time, Lana said, "Yes, I'm fine." One pale hand darted toward her face. At the contact, she flinched, even as Mary Eunice's roughened palm caressed her in the tenderest of ways. *Calm down. Stop being stupid. She's not going to bite you. She's your friend.* Mary Eunice felt her forehead as well before she deemed Lana passable, running no temperature.

They worked in silence in the kitchen, air crackling with tension. Each noise, no matter how mild, startled her as her consciousness participated in reality with bits and pieces stuck in a basement with Wendy's corpse. She turned on the faucet, hand under the stream to test the temperature.

The chill bit into her skin. In the blink of an eye, he strode behind her, pacing. "You won't break the chain, Lana. There's no escape. I've brought you here for a reason. You're going to tell my story. And you're going to recover." She covered her eyes to avoid meeting Wendy's frozen, glazed gaze, shaming her in death. *This is all my fault. "The sooner you touch her, the sooner I'll have you in a nice, warm bed—a toilet—any meal you desire—a bath. Monitored, of course. I can't have you eating soap behind my back.*" His friendly smile had no sinister underlyings.

"Touch her. Show me your favorite places. She can't hurt you."

Mary Eunice touched the small of her back. She yelped a scream, seizing and whipping around. Her hands clung to the edge of the counter. The knuckles whitened where she held on, unable to calm herself and loosen them. *Stop. Calm down. You don't want that thing to happen again.* Sweat beaded on her scalp. "I'm sorry—" She hiccups and gulped.

Slender hands reached for her, then hesitated and thought better of it; instead, she reached around Lana to turn off the running water. "What's the matter?"

*Stop asking me that. "Nothing, I'm fine." I'm broken and you can't fix me.*

"I don't believe that, Lana." Her tone, gentle and probing, did not condescend to her; worry
seeped into her beautiful, ocean-blue eyes, and Lana wiped the beading sweat from her brow. "I know you can't tell me everything." A ball of emotion squeezed inside Lana's chest, despairing at Mary Eunice's words. You're the only one who listens—you're the only one I tell anything. "Did you have a dream?"

Lana shook her head. "No. No, it wasn't that—I'm just, I'm..." She didn't know how to finish her sentence. The confusion overwhelmed her. Mary Eunice extended her arms, half-open, offering a hug, and Lana folded herself into it, collapsing into the embrace. Mary Eunice clutched her tight around the middle. A lump of tears erupted in her throat and stung her eyes. Don't cry. God, after all this, why are you crying? "I—" Her whisper had no substance, but Mary Eunice was quiet and listening. "It's stupid, I just—when I came inside and I couldn't find you—I thought something had happened—which is stupid, it's stupid—"

"It's not. You can't keep telling yourself that." At her encouraging words, Lana screwed up her face, pressing it into Mary Eunice's pale neck. Her shoulders quaked with distress.

"I found you—god. I was about to call the police—call Barb, 'Hey, somebody kidnapped your girlfriend—but it didn't, it didn't go away.' She sniffed hard, fighting for her composure. It wouldn't assemble. It kept splintering into pieces again and again. "The anxiety, the panic, I couldn't control them—couldn't catch my breath—" Stop crying, you idiot. Why are you still crying? "My chest hurt, I was dizzy, everything was going numb..." Her lower jaw shook too hard for her to continue speaking. She pinched her eyes closed so she couldn't see the black blots in her vision, the dizziness swelling back into her.

"Lana." The address cut through to her, a calming, cool breeze. "You can always ask me if you're afraid. There's nothing in my life more important than being your friend. I'll hop out of the shower naked as a mole rat if I have to." The hysteria burbled to the surface in a too loud, too forward laugh at Mary Eunice's blunt choice of words. "I will." She pushed Lana back by the waist to take her hands and rub them, the feeling returning as she did so. The tunnel vision faded, and Lana's gaze flicked to the tile floor. She relished in the warmth of Mary Eunice's dry, calloused hands massaging her sweaty, trembling digits. This is ridiculous. You shouldn't feel this way. "I'm worried about you."

She flattened her lips into a straight line, but she couldn't meet her eyes. "You shouldn't. I'm fine."

Mary Eunice squeezed her hands. "I know you don't want to, but I—I really think you should try to get some help—someone to talk to—"

A scowl twisted her face, so visceral that it silenced Mary Eunice's words; her nude pink lips trembled as Lana retreated from her clutching hands. The vulnerable look pained her insides. "I can't. You know that." She hugged herself, arms wrapping around her chest. "No one would be willing to see me."

"You don't know that." Mary Eunice's shining blue eyes, like a mirror, reflected Lana in all the ways she couldn't see herself. "You could try—you might find someone—"

She scoffed, grating her jaw. "You heard the telephone on Tuesday. Everyone hates me!"

Mary Eunice touched her elbow; she flinched at the sudden contact, muscles tensing. She craved the caress, but it burned her skin. "Please," Mary Eunice whispered. "It's not getting better. It's getting worse."

"Do you think I don't know that?" A big tear left the corner of Mary Eunice's eye. It glimmered on her cheek, her eyes rimmed with red distress. Her hands opened and closed. She grasped for something she couldn't reach, something invisible, and dissuaded herself from it before she
reached again. "I don't want to be this way, I don't want to lose my mind whenever you leave my sight—" She heaved a ragged breath. "I'm not crazy."

"I know you're not crazy," Mary Eunice promised, a wry, sad smile accompanying her tears. "I've got years of experience with crazy people. I know you're not." Lana wanted to wipe her tears away, to grab her face and kiss them from her cheeks and soothe her and silence her fears, but she knew better; no amount of physical contact could soothe Mary Eunice's misgivings. "But—I'm not crazy, and I'm seeing Father Joseph. He helps a lot. You could find someone like that, who will really listen to you and help you with the things you can't tell me, or the things I don't know how to fix—"

Her shout ripped out of her chest, uncontrollable. "I can't! I can't do that!" Mary Eunice cringed from her raised voice, hands curling upward to shield herself, like she expected Lana to strike her. Guilt, immediate and lethal, pulsed from her gut to all of her extremities. You don't have to yell. Why did you yell? God, why are you so awful? "I'm sorry—" Lana unwound her arms from around herself. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't yell. God, I'm sorry."

Mary Eunice dissuaded her with a muted, "It's okay."

Lana shook her head. "It's not okay. I don't have any right to raise my voice at you. I'm sorry." She pressed one hand to her throbbing temple, closing her eyes. The corpse lay in her memory, rigid and chilled, the image carved into the back of her eyelids. Blue lips. She shuddered and opened her eyes to blue eyes, blue eyes moving with vitality and all the anxious worry in the world. The shivers wriggled through her muscles like she had jumped into a snowbank and submerged herself. "Can I—Can I hug you again?"

Arms swaddled her in safety, warm and reliable and smelling so sweet. She basked in the sunlight that was Mary Eunice, reclined on the blanket of grass and allowed the other woman's world to protect her from the evils of her own mind. "You never have to ask." Lana nestled close to her, wishing they could collapse into bed together and snuggle and rest and hold one another away from all of the world's traumas. "I love you, Lana, more than anything else." I know, I know, it hurts that you could give me so much devotion, it hurts that I hurt you. Lana's brown eyes wandered up from the tucked place where their bodies wound together to Mary Eunice's round face. "Won't you please think about it? I'm your friend. I want you to be happy."

I don't know if I'll ever be happy again. Lana's eyes misted over. She had never appreciated things when she had them. Now, the shortest joyful moments lit her day. All of her happiness, no matter how fleeting, rode on Mary Eunice's shoulders, her laugh, her smile, her gentle disposition. You are the happiest thing in my life. It was to this thought that she nodded her head. She had to think about it. She had to give it her best shot (and what other shot could she give? Her best shot was the reason she was still alive), no matter how it terrified her. She deserved better. And Mary Eunice deserved better.

The flushed, pink lips puckered, blood flowing through them, and Lana lifted her head out of reflexive expectation, her own mouth straining for the contact. Mary Eunice planted a quick peck to the tip of her nose. Disappointment expanded in the pit of her stomach. They lingered, so close, eyes meeting and breaths mingling, tasting one another's essence. I want to kiss you, ran into Please, for the love of god, kiss me! ran into Fuck it, I'm kissing you, but just as she leaned forward, a hesitant voice called from the living room, "Lana? Mary Eunice?"

They severed, only linking their hands together, and Lana answered, "We're in the kitchen!"

Lois met them there. "Thank god. I thought you'd both gone and left me with the dog." On cue, Gus lumbered after her, wagging his tail in anticipation for his meal. "Oh? Cooking without me?"
"Sister Mary Eunice can only babysit one bad cook at a time."

Arching an eyebrow, Lois winked at her playfully. "As long as you don't catch the whole house on fire, I think you can both handle my tasteless food." She brushed past Lana and grabbed Mary Eunice around the waist; her hands jabbed at Mary Eunice's sensitive belly, eliciting a squeal of laughter. "Alright, sis, chicken and noodles?" Sis? An annoying shred of jealousy tinged inside Lana. What the hell? "I know how to open a can. Do you use cream of chicken soup or cream of mushroom?" Lois touched the inside of Mary Eunice's wrist, hands light but clinging to her. Stop touching her! What are you doing?

The possessiveness disgruntled Lana so much, she stopped listening. Don't be stupid. Mary Eunice isn't uncomfortable. She's smiling. Lois said something clever, and Mary Eunice giggled as she scraped out the thick contents of a can into the pot. "The chicken base is in the fridge," she was telling Lois, who fetched it with another teasing quip. And Lois is happy. With a concentrated effort, she forced the envy to abate. You don't have any claim to her. You're just her friend. She sliced the chicken to those thoughts, stomach and chest easing.

As they stirred up the amalgamation of things into the pot, Lois perked up. "Hey, Lana?"

Lana lifted her head to look at her and promptly set the blade of the knife into her own finger. "Fuck!" She jumped back from the cutting board. Blood trickled out of the sliced wound. Mary Eunice left her station at the pot and took Lana's hand, sticking it under the faucet. "Goddammit."

Plucking her lower lip between her teeth, Mary Eunice tutted, "And your arm was just starting to look a little better."

"What happened to your arm?"

She set her jaw. "I got cut," she hedged, reluctant to slander Mary Eunice's family to Lois, uncertain how to begin explaining Celest's visit and its violent end. She glanced up to Mary Eunice, hoping to find some guidance or reassurance in her expression, but Mary Eunice deliberately avoided her gaze, as doubtful as ever.

Suspicion wriggled upon Lois's face in the corners of her eyes and mouth. "Oh," she said, but her expression held a world of assumption.

She thinks I cut myself. Of course she does. Lana chewed the inside of her cheek. Let her think that. "What were you going to say? Before I nearly severed my own finger." Mary Eunice ripped off a paper towel and swaddled the cut digit, squeezing tight enough that Lana winced. She mumbled an apology, but she didn't lessen the pressure, using it to stem the blood flow.

Brightening once more, Lois grinned. "Oh, right!" She stirred the pot before she heaved it to the stove. "I was just thinking that we should do something for Halloween. It's less than two weeks away..." A suggestive tag trailed on the end of her sentence, and Lana's stomach pooled with dread at the prospect of Lois's next words. "And you know it's always been my dream to dress up a pretty girl to look like Marilyn Monroe."

Lana glanced up to Mary Eunice, gauging her reaction, but Mary Eunice hadn't heard, too concentrated on the wound in her grasp to pay any heed. Oh, boy. Lana cleared her throat to draw her attention. "Sorry, what was that?" she asked as she peered up at them, looking to Lois and back to Lana. She kept her hands tight around Lana's cut finger, adding another wrapping of paper towel around it when the first hints of blood peeked through.

Lois leaned back against the counter. "I want to dress you up for Halloween. Can I?"
"Don't—she wants to make you look like Marilyn Monroe," Lana warned, shooting a Lois a glare for her vague explanation.

"Oh... I don't know." Mary Eunice stared down at the wrapped finger, not meeting either gaze. Her nude lips vanished between her teeth, the soft flesh bending around the place where she nibbled, the skin sheened in her saliva. "I—I'm not exactly Marilyn Monroe material. I'm not the definition of Hollywood beauty, by any means."

Flicking on one of the burners, Lois whirled around to grin at her. "You're perfect! You're beautiful. I don't know who ever told you otherwise, but they were wrong." Mary Eunice's face flamed, flustered. "I'm serious!" Lois insisted. "Don't you want to?"

Blue eyes darted back up to Lana, uncertain and seeking guidance, before she licked her lips and answered Lois with a hedged, "I guess so."

With her good hand, Lana pinched the bridge of her nose. "You know who Marilyn Monroe is, right? She's, like, the sex icon of the century."

"Halloween is all about dressing up and having fun, being someone you're not," Mary Eunice said with a mild shrug. She peeled the paper towels off of Lana's finger once the flow of blood had slowed. "Can you bend it? Does it hurt?"

"Yeah, it feels like I slit it open with a knife." Lois chuckled at Lana's sarcastic reply, but she softened with a smile. "I'm fine. Thank you." She gazed back into Mary Eunice's blue eyes; Lois had her back to them, stirring the pot which she brought to a boil, leaving them in the briefest of privacies. The green flecks in her blue eyes expanded as Lana gazed at her. Her heart filled, overflowed with, affection and joy at the sight of her. Mary Eunice waited for her to speak, a silent expectation, so Lana finally mouthed, "I love you," so Lois couldn't hear.

Mary Eunice swept down and kissed her forehead, a quick, dry peck, but it made Lana's chest throb with all of her vitals skipping in contrast to one another. Their hands caught once again, knotted at the knuckles, and with her hand in the grasp of another, the last of Lana's anxieties faded, lost in the valleys of Mary Eunice's fingers.
"It's normal for her to be a little late. Sometimes people start dying and she has to help save them," Lois said, eyes moving back and forth to follow where Lana paced in the living room floor, hands behind her back and head leaning forward. "Especially this time of year—it's flu season. They get a lot of really sick people." Lana grunted, only half-listening to Lois's musings on Barb's tardiness. The other half of her brain, more dominant, painted the scenarios of things that could have happened to Barb. An evil doctor injected her with a vial of some noxious liquid to knock her out and kidnap her. A man pretended to be injured so he could corner her in the ER and murder her. Some stranger grabbed her on her way out of the hospital so no one realized she was missing. A horrible car accident left her decapitated and unidentifiable. "Would you stop pacing? You're making me dizzy!"

At the sharp address, Lana halted and glanced up at Lois in shock. "Honestly—she's my girlfriend. This is normal. She doesn't work in an office. It's not all nine to five. Cut her a little slack."

"It's been an hour." Lana wrung her hands, anxiety prickling inside of her. Her heart refused to still in her chest, not as uncontrollable as it had been before, but fast enough to cause her discomfort. Her gaze flicked to Mary Eunice, where she sat beside Lois on the couch in solemn silence, both blue eyes gazing back at Lana with worry. Is she worried about Barb or about me? "I can't take it. I'm calling the hospital. I've got to talk to her."

A soft breath left Mary Eunice's mouth before she interrupted, "Lana—wait. If she's really busy, she won't be able to talk to you anyway." She stood and reached out for Lana's wrist. "Come on, sit down. Worrying isn't going to do anything. It just means you suffer twice. Lois knows best." You're being silly. Her logical mind knew it, and she allowed Mary Eunice to tug her away, rubbing the cold tension out of her hands.

With narrowed eyes, Lois frowned. "Are you always like this?" She regarded Lana first, but as Lana gave a noncommittal shrug, averting her eyes. "Is she?" she pressed, glancing at Mary Eunice, who froze like a deer in headlights, unable to lie with a no but unwilling to betray Lana by confirming.

Lana squeezed Mary Eunice's hand, allowing a measured sigh to leave her nose. "It's worse today than normal," she admitted through clenched teeth, reluctant to share it, but beside her, Mary Eunice gave an encouraging smile. "I'm fine. I just need a drink."

Pursing her lips, Lois tilted her head. "You know, they can give you a pill for that. Barb's on it." Lana quirked her eyebrows at her, surprised at the revelation. Why is Barb on a psycho pill? Lois's lips curled upward at the corners, a reassurance that her confusion wasn't misplaced. "When they had that horrible car accident last year, with the school bus, where all those children were crushed, and there weren't enough doctors on staff—she held this little boy, he was bleeding. He bled out in her arms."
It struck her, a fist pummeling into the soft of her gut. "She never told us about that."

Lois shrugged, inclining her eyebrows. "She didn't tell me for months, not what had really happened." She picked at the hem of her sleeve as she spoke, tugging at the string. "She had these awful nightmares—she would wake up screaming. And the sight of blood could cripple her." Would Barb want her to tell us this? Lana didn't care; she wanted to hear what Lois had to say. "I cut my leg shaving, one night, and she just lost her mind. We both thought she was having a heart attack. She couldn't breathe, and her chest was hurting, and she just—she collapsed. Then I freaked out, I called the ambulance to pick her up—they wound up taking both of us because I was bleeding like a stuck pig—really, we were a fiasco."

Chuckling to herself, Lois shook her head, wry in her way. "But, after I got some stitches, and I found Barb's room, and by then they had calmed her down. I was so fucked up, I just looked at the doctor and I asked, 'So is she dying?' and the asshole started laughing at me. He said it was just a panic attack, which just a panic attack sounded so dismissive to me, she blacked out in the living room floor—I hate doctors, honestly, I don't know how she deals with them every day." She settled on the couch cushions, crossing her arms. "Then he diagnosed her with general anxiety disorder and gave her a prescription and told her to see her GP. She went to therapy for awhile—I guess four or five months—before her counselor relocated, and she still takes her Valium every day. She hasn't had one of those attacks since."

Silence consumed Lana, all the voices inside her warring with different, conflicting opinions. If Barb had done it, why couldn't she? But she wasn't Barb. People knew about her. She had all of her secrets stripped bare, revealed on the front page of the newspaper, and she'd seen much more than a dying child; she'd killed a child herself, tearing out the contents of her own womb and nearly paying the price for it. "I didn't know any of that," she said again. But you could have assumed. She remembered the accident well; one of Wendy's students had died in it, and she had grieved for months. But Lana had never considered the effect it had had on Barb. "I never would have thought it of Barb. She's always so..."

"Stoic," Lois said in a dreamy voice.

"I was going to say vulgar, but sure."

Mary Eunice chuckled at their antics, ducking her head, and Lana eased an arm over her shoulders to pull her closer. The flush of warmth from her body steadied the prickles of nervousness inside her chest. Lois's conversation had helped abate her anxiety. Mary Eunice rested her head on Lana's shoulder, skin and gaze soft. Her sweet blue eyes were as open and innocent as a clear summer sky. God, she's so beautiful. God, I wish I could kiss her. Their gazes locked, and Mary Eunice's grin widened, a pink blush tinging her cheeks. It overwhelmed Lana's belly, boiling with all of her spiked emotions—the affection, the attraction, the love, the arousal, the shame, the sadness. She rolled her hand over the pale, slender one on her knee.

The doorbell shrilled. Both Mary Eunice and Lana jumped where they sat, the latter yelping with surprise while the former latched onto her, pallor blanching. Lois tossed her head back into a loud laugh. "Don't worry, girls, I'll kill the spider." She rolled her eyes as she rose and headed to the front door, muttering, "You bunch of useless lesbians." Fuck. Lana tried to let the tension ease out of her body. Mary Eunice isn't a lesbian. But, as she loosened one tight fist from her clothing, she peered up at Mary Eunice, face turning pink once more in the shame of her overreaction.

"Barb!" shrieked Lois, and they both fell back into the house, slamming the door behind them as she flung her arms around her girlfriend. "I missed you so much." Long, rusty streaks scattered over Barb's scrubs, and she hugged Lois in return, tired in the embrace. Dark circles curled under her eyes; her flared up in a mused fixture. "What took you so long? What happened?"
Barb yawned as Lois released her, covering her mouth with her hand. "Oh, yeah. The blood." She shrugged. "I tried to stick a kid. Kinda missed my mark. He spurted all over me. I was late because I fell asleep in one of the ER beds and woke up with a candy striper asking me if she could get me anything and if I'd been seen by the doctor yet." A grin stretched across her face, erasing all of the exhaustion, and she turned to Lana and Mary Eunice. "C'mon. It's Friday night. Put on your trashiest clothes and meet up here in ten minutes. We're going to Pat Joe's."

*Oh, no. I'm not doing that.* "No—Yeah, no, that's not happening," Lana objected. "You two have a good time. You can take anything you want in the closet."

"I wasn't asking." Barb fixed a challenging look on her, head thrust upward, arms crossed, legs spread apart in her parked position, unmoving. "Give me one good reason we shouldn't all go to Pat Joe's and get drunk off of our asses."

"I'm not leaving Sister Mary Eunice by herself."

Mary Eunice perked up. "Oh, don't worry about me—I'll be fine here with Gus. You should go with them and have fun."

Rolling her eyes, Barb interrupted, "The point is moot. You're coming too." Mary Eunice's eyes widened with shock at her revelation. "Come on. I can't wear bloody scrubs to go dancing. Lana's sweatpants wouldn't even impress a geriatric with erectile dysfunction—Lois, your hair looks like it hasn't been brushed since the end of the war, and Mary Eunice looks like she's ready to go to church. We've all got work to do."

Like sheep, Lois and Mary Eunice allowed Barb to herd them through the living room, Gus trotting along at their feet with a wagging tail, happy to engage in the game. "Wait—" Lana hopped up from the couch and followed. "Wait a second. We can't take a nun to a gay bar. I don't care how liberal she is—somebody might see, and then it'll be in the newspaper, and then her priest will find out, and then—"

"God, Lana, you sound like one of those doomsday predictors on the radio." Barb opened the closet and rifled through it.

Big blue eyes flipped over Mary Eunice's shoulder to look back at Lana, terror written upon her face, and Lana went to her side, taking her hand. "No, I'm serious. It's not a good idea. She doesn't want to, and neither do I. We're staying here."

Biting her lower lip, Mary Eunice objected, "It's okay—I can go." She dropped her gaze away from Lana's, hiding her discomfort. "Nobody will see me. It'll be okay." A cold sweat beaded on her palms. The warmth seeped out of her fingertips, and Lana rubbed her hand to try and keep it steady. *Why? Why is she saying that? It doesn't make any sense.* Lana gazed at the side of her face, but when Mary Eunice glanced at her, she managed a small, sheepish smile, crafted with good intentions. "It might be fun." God, there she goes, martyring herself again.

Barb tugged out the first outfit from the closet and tossed it at Mary Eunice. "Here you go, sweetie." Mary Eunice examined the blue dress Barb had hurled at her, rolling it out to look at the pattern and feeling the fabric. At her unconvinced look, Barb continued, "You'll definitely want to lose those pantyhose and the turtleneck. It's hot as hell in the bar. And… you're pretty tall, you can take the flats."

Clutching the dress, Mary Eunice turned her back on the other women and wriggled out of her sweater and skirt and pantyhose. She stepped into the garment, pale as the winter sky, and tugged it up to her shoulders; Lana zipped it up the back while she tied the belt in front. "It's kind of, um, short." She tugged on the hem of the skirt where it fell a few inches above her kneecaps.
Lois piddled through, selecting a ruffled green blouse and tidy pencil skirt, and she stripped down right there beside them to put her new clothing on. "Oh, I feel like a new woman. Lana, can I borrow your makeup?" Lana nodded, only half of her mind paying attention; Barb launched a bright red dress at her. "Great. C'mon, Sister, I'll make you look like a doll." She dragged Mary Eunice away by the wrist.

Holding up the red dress, Lana scowled. "I can't wear this. I'll look like a bloodstain!"

"Fine." Barb took it back from her. "I'll wear it. You can have the floral blouse and polka dot skirt." Lana rolled her eyes, reaching for her favorite khaki skirt, but Barb swatted her hand away. "Hey! You need to look like someone worth fucking. Khakis aren't fuckable." She fumbled around, tugging out a form-fitting black gown. "Here. This leaves a little bit to the imagination." Barb winked at her, playful.

_I don't want to be someone worth fucking_. Lana's eyes stung, but she sank her teeth into the tip of her tongue to keep from replying with snark. She whirled around and stripped out of her clothing. The lacy, short gown hugged her figure, too skinny and grotesque. _I don't want to do this_. She had last been to Pat Joe's with Wendy at her side—she had only been to Pat Joe's with Wendy. They had always gone as a couple, to dance together, to drink together, to stumble home drunk as skunks together and fuck like a couple of rabbits. _I don't want to do this without her._ "Lana!" Lois summoned from the bathroom. "Hurry, I can't decide which color blush looks best on Mary Eunice!"

She mopped a hand through her hair. _Oh, dear god. She's going to make her look like some kind of tramp from the streets of Paris_. "Coming!" She swatted a few dust bunnies from the surface of her black dress, plucking at the lacy fabric. Heading into the bathroom, she found Lois straddling Mary Eunice's lap, her head wrenched backward as Lois curled mascara through her eyelashes. An amalgamation of makeup was strewn across the sink, rouge and foundation and lipstick, all variety of things Lana had forgotten she even owned. "Oh, dear god—Lois, some of this stuff hasn't been unearthed for years. It's probably not safe—what are you doing to her?" Mary Eunice was stiff, unable to move beneath Lois; she had pinched her knees together, but Lois's position in her lap drew the hem of her skirt up too high, revealing long stretches of fuzzy alabaster thigh.

Lois turned her head, the tube of mascara clutched between her teeth. She grinned and dropped it back to the sink to answer, "I'm dolling her up. Now, which shade of blush and which color lipstick?" She twisted the mascara back into the tube and reached for some eyeliner. "Actually—hey, you just do this for me, and I'll work on her hair. This is a really neat braid, but it's too churchy. I'm going to give you a waterfall style, stick a bow in it—that'll be pretty." Lois slid out of Mary Eunice's lap and gathered up her blonde locks, unraveling them from the braid Mary Eunice had formed that morning. "I might curl it, too…"

Barb fluttered after them, moving in light movements with her red dress dancing around. "Sweetie, just be quick. You can play dress-up any night." She gazed at herself in the mirror and added lipstick to her face and eyeshadow, using foundation to smear away the acne scars on her cheeks. She gathered up her dark hair in her hands and turned to face the others. "Actually—she'd make a fair Marilyn Monroe!"

"I know!" Lois squealed. "We're going to do Halloween. Isn't she going to be fantastic?"

Rolling her eyes, Lana dropped down in front of Mary Eunice. "Sorry," she whispered as she sponged out some foundation. Barb and Lois continued to heehaw above them, paying little heed. She wiped the foundation deep into Mary Eunice's pale skin; it covered her adorable smattering of freckles and left her porcelain as a doll. "You really don't have to do this." Lana put away the eyeliner; she had no intentions of stabbing Mary Eunice in the eye to sate Lois's feminine
"Sorry, Jesus." Barb snatched Lana's hair and coarsely ripped the brush through its tangles. "Chill. I'm going to get you a pretty bun." Once the brush ran through smoothly, she twisted Lana's hair, Lana wincing. Mary Eunice gave her a sympathetic look, a weak smile on her face. *Did I pick these people to be my friends? I don't remember that.* "Lois, hurry up."

"I'm working on it! She has a lot of hair—ugh, it's so beautiful. I could do your hair every day. It's so thick—"

"That's what she said," Barb quipped, and Lois and Lana both choked. "Here—no, Lana, really?" Barb took the pink tube of lipstick away from her hand and replaced it with the dark red. "We're all going big tonight. Ravish me red." She unscrewed the tube of lipstick and smeared it across her own mouth, and then she drew a face on Lana's frown, eyes narrow to reach all of the parts of her lips. "All of us who are religiously allowed to get laid are going to get laid, and the one who isn't is going to be damned enthusiastic about our success. Pucker up, cupcake." Mary Eunice had no choice but to obey, but the corners of her mouth were drawn downward, her knuckles whitened where she clutched the rim of the toilet bowl. *Something bothered her. I hope she's okay. Did she remember something? Oh, god, she can't have remembered something now.*

Once Lois freed Mary Eunice, Lana tugged her to her feet and pulled her to safety from their hasty slappings of makeup on clean faces. "Are you okay?" she whispered, which earned a too-quick nod in response. Lana caught her hand, squeezing it until Mary Eunice met her eyes with their wide, frightened blue like a deer frozen in the sight of a hunter's gun. "Hey. I'm serious. Are you going to be okay?" The bright red lipstick protruded from her complexion, greasy where her lips slipped over one another. "Did you remember something?" Mary Eunice nodded again, slow this time in her honesty. *Fuck. Do you need to talk about it?"

She shook her head. "No—I'm fine. Really." She pressed a smile onto her face, weak at first but then growing in its strength. "Don't worry about me." Her thumb rolled over the back of Lana's hand, feeling all of the veins there, and the tickling sensation wormed up Lana's arm. *She is so soft.*

Allowing a soft breath to flush from her lips, she agreed, "Okay."

Lois blitzed her with a smattering of makeup across her face and then wielded a bottle of cologne, spritzing it into everyone's clothing and around their necks until Mary Eunice sneezed. "By the way," Barb asked, "how did that flu work out for you?"

Barb wore a friendly smile, but Mary Eunice fidgeted; her previous encounter with Barb had scarred her, so she hummed a polite, "It was okay," which made all of them chuckle. Lana took her purse and her keys, everyone sliding into shoes.

"Okay?" Barb echoed, inclining her eyebrows. "I just saw a woman who was too weak to crawl to the bathroom or chew her own food."

"It definitely wasn't okay," Lana said. Mary Eunice shot her a mortified look, and she nudged her in the side, placating her fears. "She was sicker than a beached whale for three days straight." Everyone filed out of the house, Lana going last to lock up. Through the door, Gus yapped a few barks of protest at the separation. "I wonder what he'll have eaten when we get back." He ran to the window and peeked through the blinds, thrusting his nose through so he could watch them leave. "You put up all the makeup, right? I don't want him to die."

"Of course! Your products won't last if you don't take good care of them. Honestly, what do you think I am, some kind of animal?" Lois climbed into the front seat beside Barb while Lana and
Mary Eunice took the backseat; Mary Eunice picked at the skirt of her dress, trying to pull it down and make it longer, to hide more of her legs.

Lana’s eyes followed her slender fingers where they dragged at the hem. As Mary Eunice noticed, she ducked her head, sheepish; the makeup obscured her blush. "This is the trashiest thing I've worn since 1953," she admitted.

She whispered the words, but Lois overheard, chuckling. "Really? Wouldn't you have been, like, fifteen?" Mary Eunice bobbed her head, and Lois's laugh became more incredulous and raw. "We all have to get trashy every once in awhile. Don't worry—if somebody grabs you, we'll beat their asses." *Oh, yeah, that will really comfort her.* Lana massaged the fading bruises on the back of her knuckles, the places where she had bloodied Celest's face in retribution for harming Mary Eunice.

The words made Mary Eunice give Lana a panicked look, and Lana patted her knee to soothe her. "Nobody will try anything," she promised. "I'll stay with you. If they try to come onto you, you just sit in my lap, and they'll buzz off. Nobody wants to fuck with me now."

Barb rolled her eyes, visible in the rearview mirror as she turned onto the main strip; the Friday night traffic hopped around, kids on the sidewalks, families in the yards. "Right—you're really threatening, aren't you, Lana?"

"I was referring the fact that I can expose the names of every queer in Boston to the newspaper for my own benefit—but I'll break my knuckles if I have to."

"You wouldn't!" Lois giggled.

"Try me." Mary Eunice murmured an admonition, but Lana winked to her, resting a hand on her knee. *So pretty. So soft. I'll eat anyone who tries to hurt her.* She found Mary Eunice's hand and squeezed it, fingers melting into one another. The bright red lipstick and makeup hadn't changed her so much; she remained the same, captured in innocence and gentleness, with the certain light dancing in her blue eyes. Mary Eunice cupped Lana's hand between the both of hers and pulled it into her lap, cradled between her thighs. *She trusts you so much.* The thought made Lana's heart sink. Her true feelings would destroy Mary Eunice. *If she only knew.*

She closed her eyes and turned her face away until Mary Eunice nudged her, sidling up beside her, their legs brushing. Lana glanced back up to her. "I'm okay," she mouthed in response to the question Mary Eunice hadn't asked. In answer, the hands squeezed tight around hers.

Lois and Barb chattered onward, paying little heed to their silence, until they pulled into the parking lot of an unassuming barbershop, the faded green sign reading "Eckleburg’s Trim and Shave". Barb parked at the far back of the lot right by the street. No other vehicles inhabited the lot. "C'mon, let's hurry before somebody sees," Barb said, rushing to seize her purse. She stuffed her keys into it. "I don't want Pat or Joe to find out I parked in the front lot. They'd have a conniption."

Tiptoeing after the others, Mary Eunice stuck right in Lana's shadow, her feet tapping right into the places where Lana's short heels vacated. The cool October breeze ruffled up under the skirt of her short dress; it blew up, and blush crawled up her neck in response. She had no command now, none but God, but she still couldn't shake the notion of *Sister Jude is going to absolutely kill me,* and she glanced over her shoulder, like she waited for Jude to appear at any moment and attack her for her provocative dress, cane in hand. Lana reached back and took her by the elbow, and she trotted to keep step with her.

Around the back of the building, Barb led them; everyone had fallen into a solemn silence, and as Lois reached for Barb's hand, Barb swatted her away. She gave a long surveying look at the street
before she nodded to the rest. *What's that about?* Mary Eunice glanced sideways at Lana. She said, "We have to make sure there aren't any policemen on this street before we go inside. Otherwise, it looks pretty suspicious." *Oh, right. This is a crime.* Her belly flipped at the prospect. I'm a criminal now. Or, at least, an accessory to a crime. Her sweaty, cold hands wrung in front of her body until Lana reached from her elbow and secured a grip there; the grasp grounded her in reality, and she fought for more positive thoughts. They've been doing this for years, and they've never been arrested. God, please don't let us get in trouble. Is it right to pray to get away with a crime? It really shouldn't be a crime. God understands that.

They followed Barb around to the back steps of the business. Inside, everything was dark, apparently closed. The silhouettes of barbershop chairs and sinks stood in the evening light from the front windows, no occupants shuffling around. Barb rapped thrice on the door. A series of footsteps echoed from inside, and then a man swung the door open. "Get in, hurry!" he hissed; he was an older gentleman, short with thick white hair and a moustache curled up at the corners. At the invitation, they all scrambled into the building, out of sight. "I did not just see the four of you park in the front lot."

Lois and Lana glanced at one another before they all fixed gazes on Barb, who shrugged. "Sorry, Pat."

"You better be. Joe and I are running a respectable business here. I don't want any fuzz breathing down our necks." Pat appraised them each with a jerk of his head. "Good to see you again, Lana." His pale eyes moved to Mary Eunice, and all of the hair on her body stood up, raised into goosebumps at the scrutiny. "And you must be the famous nun." He leaned back, crossing his arms. "I would ask to see some ID, but given your status, I would assume you don't have any intentions of drinking." *No, I'd really like to get out of this alive, without puking.* She shook her head. "Good. Nice dress, by the way." Her cheeks flamed red, and she offered a mumbled thanks in return.

He opened the door to his left and gave way to what looked like a broom closet, complete with mops and buckets and various cleaning chemicals, but the other women filed in. Barb grabbed a hook on the wall where a keyring dangled and tugged. The panel swung open on hinges and gave way to a staircase. *Is this the sort of place Anne Frank lived in? That was so well-hidden?* But as soon as the panel gave way, the rocking of jazz music sounded, and lights flashed from below, and voices chattered on and off, and she knew she had found a place nothing like the Anne Frank house.

The wide basement sprawled out, flat with gray flooring, and people mingled intermittently; a live band played on a makeshift wooden stage, trumpets and trombones and saxophones, guitars and a drumset and a series of percussive instruments Mary Eunice couldn't name. A few men and women swung around together before the stage, while those further back stood in circles and chatted. "Oh, I've got to go talk to my queens—" Lois gazed at the band of men wearing dresses, but before she could make a break for it, Barb dragged her back.

"Wait a minute, sugar! Alright—who's the responsible one tonight?"

They all surveyed each other, Lana crossing her arms and sucking her teeth while Lois volunteered, "Well, Mary Eunice can't drink, so she should take that bullet for the rest of us, right?"

*Me? I'm hardly responsible enough to take care of myself.* Mary Eunice winced an anxious smile, but Lana offered an explanation. "The responsible one makes sure nobody gets too wasted or leaves with a stranger. It means you get the shared group brain cell for the night." Lois laughed at that quip. "Tonight it's easy. They are going to shag each other, and I'm not going to shag anyone."
"Don't be so negative, Lana! You might find someone spectacular—but, really, she's the only one you have to worry about. I know whose clothes I'm going to be pulling off in a few hours, and it's not some random tap dancer." Barb winked at Lois, and Lana rolled her eyes so hard that the color vanished back into her skull for a brief moment.

"Can I go talk to my queens now?"

"Yes, go talk to the queens—god forbid you miss a new dress style." They split in separate directions, Lois making a beeline for the gaggle of men in dresses while Barb headed nearer to the dance floor and tangled with a woman wearing a bright yellow dress smattered in red polka dots.

In their absence, Mary Eunice looked up at Lana; with half of their group missing, she felt naked—both metaphorically and literally, as she smoothed down the short skirt of her blue dress. Nervousness built in the center of her stomach, whispering all the things in her ear where contrary emotions smashed into one another. She didn't belong here, but yet she did. It felt so right, as right as it had felt when Lois teased her about loving Lana. Its rightness ached with confusion in her belly. These things, she hadn't felt them before, nor anything similar to them.

Lana flexed a grin, easy and wry, all those hollow places in her eyes holding steady. "Let's go sit at the bar. Earl's there, he'll keep you safe."

*I've never sat at a bar before.* Mary Eunice didn't say it aloud, because this whole building was an amalgamation of things she hadn't done before and had never intended to do in her life. "Is—Is the bartender the black man in the dress?"

Lana choked on a laugh. "Her name is Jasmine, and if you call her a man in a dress to her face, I won't be able to help you." Mary Eunice quirked her eyebrows at the words; she had never heard of something so preposterous! A man was still a man if he wore a dress—right? "Don't worry," Lana soothed. "She's very sweet." Lana doesn't think so. Mary Eunice decided to trust Lana's expertise on this subject.

At the sound of Lana's voice, Earl spun around on his bar stool. He clutched a mug of beer in one fist. "Well, won't you look at that?" He grinned. "It's our sunshine Sister and Lana. Come on, girls. It's nice to see you both." He patted the stool beside him, and Lana nudged Mary Eunice, so she climbed up beside him. "What was your name again, kid? I would've remembered a beer or two ago, but—well, you know how it goes." His nose wrinkled as he belched.

Cheeks flushing, Mary Eunice smiled; the way Earl addressed her reminded her of her father, just as it had the first time she met him. "Mary Eunice," she answered, and he nodded in apt approval, agreeing, "Yes, I knew that—it was in the newspaper. Hey—Jasmine, look who's come out! It's the famous dyke herself!"

"Is that what they're calling me now?" Lana asked, to which Earl shrugged.

The bartender approached; she stood tall but lean, dark-skinned with irises indiscernible from the pupils in her deep brown eyes. She wore the fanciest dress out of the women Mary Eunice had seen, bright red and silky, off of one shoulder. No breasts supported the plunging neckline, making it dangle, and over it, she wore a long white apron. Her kinky black hair was cropped close to the scalp. "I got eyes, Earl, sweetie." She flashed a winning smile, white teeth crooked, to Lana and then to Mary Eunice. "Thought I'd never see you again, honey. Somebody told me you'd started drinking in."

Lana raised her eyebrows. "Did they?"
"They did." Jasmine wiped off the bar counter with a wet washcloth and then smeared off her hand on her apron, thrusting it over the counter at Mary Eunice. "I'd suppose you're the one we all heard about in Tuesday's paper—Sister Mary Eunice." Why does everyone know me? Mary Eunice nodded, dumbstruck by this woman, a man to her every sense but still regarded a woman by everyone around her. She took the burly hand; her own slender, pale hand vanished into Jasmine's grip. "Nice to meet you. I'm Jasmine. Don't call me that in front of my wife."

"Has she figured out you're swiping her dresses yet?" Earl asked.

"No, she hasn't, and nobody better tell her—that goes for anything that winds up in the newspaper, too." She glanced up at Lana, and Lana held her hands up defensively. Jasmine inclined her eyebrows before she fixed her gaze on Mary Eunice again. "Do you want me to get you a pop, sweetie? On the house. You look scared to death." At her blunt words, both Lana and Earl choked on laughter; under the counter, Lana touched her knee, and Mary Eunice reached to take her hand, giving it a squeeze. "I promise nobody here is gonna eat you."

Do I really look scared? The nervousness prickled in her stomach, making her tongue and jaw shiver with unwarranted fear. "Um…" Talk to him—her! You look like an imbecile! "Could I, maybe, have some water?"

A sweet smile flexed across her face. "Sure. Lana? A Manhattan for you?" Lana confirmed with a nod, and Jasmine rushed off to mix Lana's drink. She returned with the cocktail glass and a bottled water, which Mary Eunice claimed, murmuring her thanks.

"C'mon, Jazzy." Earl held out his empty mug, and Jasmine refilled it. "You could always pour it into a shot glass for the little lady and make her feel darn fancy. You know she can't get many thrills. She can't even get a plate at Waffle House." Jasmine rolled her eyes at his drunk musings as he took another long sip from his mug. "Drink good, Lana?"

Lana, swishing the drink around in her mouth, gulped hard. "It's appropriately disgusting, if that's what you mean." She coughed and cringed like it burned. "Do you want a sip?" she offered Mary Eunice. No, thanks. "Didn't think so," Lana chuckled; she poured another a swallow of it into her mouth and winced, her whole face screwing up in pain. Her grip on Mary Eunice's hand tightened inadvertently.

The conversation hit a lull; Lana was silent except to consume her drinks, which went down faster after the first. In the blink of an eye, she was sipping on her fourth, and the alcohol reached her smile, which widened, filling all of the holes in her personality. "Feeling it, eh?" Jasmine said, to which Lana made an unintelligible noise, waving her hand. "Give that one a minute to settle. I don't want you puking all over my bar—Earl, really, that's enough."

Earl grinned up at her, spread ear to ear. "Y'know, Jazz—" He belched. "Y'know, I told myself my whole life, I wouldn't never sleep with a woman, but sometimes, I look at you in that dress, and I just think how much I would like to take it off!" Mary Eunice winced, rubbing her thumb over the back of Lana's hand. I hope she doesn't get like that. She didn't want to think of the things Lana might tell if she forgot herself.

Jasmine, however, took it in stride. "I'm glad you think so, sweetie, but you know I prefer the company of women. My wife is the only one for me." Farther down the bar, Barb settled with the young woman in the yellow dress, and Jasmine headed to serve them, reaching for her glasses and mixing drinks as they ordered them. At the sight of Barb, Mary Eunice glanced over her shoulder and swept the large basement room with her eyes, seeking Lois; she had immersed herself in the band of men in dresses and chatted with them. Are they women, too, like Jasmine, or are they queens? Is there a difference? She filed it away as a question to ask Lana later when they were in different company and both sober.
"Y'know, Lana." Earl's harsh voice interrupted Mary Eunice's thoughts. "I don't get it. If you're a dude, and you like women, wouldn't you be a straight dude? What's the point? You're not a lesbian—you're just a guy trying to invade queer women's spaces."

"But Jasmine isn't a straight dude, she's a woman, and she's a lesbian." Lana covered her mouth with her hand to belch. "God, you always get like this when you're drunk—pissing on her about queer theory. It's a wonder she still sells you shit. You turn into a conservative, gatekeeping asshole. Just let the woman live." She swallowed hard, licking her lips; a wetness covered her lips, and she leaked sweat. The basement room was hot. A slickness gathered under Mary Eunice's arms, in the crooks of her knees, between her thighs.

He frowned. "I can't help it—I'm a philosopher. I've gotta think about these things, and I've gotta talk about 'em, too—" The music shifted from an upbeat, big band jazz to a more relaxed tempo. "Won'tcha listen to that? That sounds pretty damn nice. I like it."

Jasmine returned from the other patrons. "Still want another one of those, Lana?" She nodded. From behind, another young woman appeared. "Hey—put that one on me, sugar." She hopped onto the stool on Lana's other side. She had long, blonde hair similar to Mary Eunice's, tugged back into a low ponytail. She's younger, though. The young woman grinned at Lana. "I've been hoping I would find you eventually!"

Lana squinted at her, a deadpan expression on her face. After a moment of consideration, she asked, "Who in the hell are you?"

The young woman giggled. "My name's Rachel." She extended her foot and tickled up against Lana's ankle; Lana turned her body away, glancing up at Mary Eunice. Her face held a world of loathing and irritation. Mary Eunice bit her lip. Should I save her? She wasn't sure how to intervene. She shuffled in the seat, crossing her own legs. "Aw, I'm sorry, sweetie. You probably get more attention than a white tiger at a zoo." Jasmine placed the drink on the counter in front of her, and Rachel scooted it nearer to her, fingers on the rim of the glass. "Do you want to dance with me, honey?"

"No." Lana took the drink from her grasp. "Don't call me honey. I'm old enough to be your mother." That's a bit of an overstatement... She sipped it. Her face screwed up into the familiar sour expression, though Mary Eunice didn't know if she disliked the flavor of the drink or the forwardness of the young woman. "Thanks," she said as an afterthought, blinking down at the drink.

"Your friend told me you like to do the lindy hop."

Lana scowled. "Goddamn Barb." Her curse made Rachel chuckle, but when Lana fixed the look on her, it abated. "What the hell do you want?"

Rachel reclined with one elbow on the bar. The lights overhead reflected in her pretty blue eyes. She's much prettier than I am. Mary Eunice's stomach turned at the thought. She clutched her bottle of water a little tighter. "Frankly, I'd like to go home with you. But I'd settle for a dance—any kind, if Barb wasn't right."

Grinding her jaw, Lana extended her right arm to hook around Mary Eunice's waist. She tugged, gentle at first but growing in firmness, until Mary Eunice slid off of her stool. "C'm'ere, sunshine," Lana mumbled. What? Lana dragged her into her lap, Lana's knee between her thighs. Oh dear. Her face flushed when Lana's arms cinched around her middle on top of the squishy, ticklish portion of her abdomen. "Can't," Lana said to Rachel. "I'm taken. Sorry."
The young woman arched an eyebrow. "Right, and I'm a gorilla. I get the newspaper too, you know." She jerked her head upright. "You're a nun—about the trashiest one I've ever seen."

"Don't be stupid." Lana's voice dropped to a growl. "I wouldn't bring a nun to a gay bar. Don't be such a man; learn to take no for an answer."

Rachel narrowed her eyes at Mary Eunice, scrutinizing and critical. "So are you her girlfriend?" God, forgive me—I'm telling lies. Mary Eunice nodded, and she placed her hands over Lana's where they met in front of her body. She scooted farther back in Lana's lap. Hot lips, flushed with liquor, kissed the place where her shoulder blended into her neck. Goosebumps shredded up her spine and across her exposed arms and legs.

Unconvinced, Rachel didn't notice. "Dishonesty is a sin, you know." Again, Mary Eunice nodded. "So you're just drinking water because you want to." Yes, yes, that's exactly it. "Great. Make out with her." The demand took both of them aback; Lana choked aloud, and she loosened one hand to take another gulp from her drink. Oh no. I can't do that. Mary Eunice cringed. Her heart grew wings and fluttered away, taking with it all of her courage. Nervousness wormed in her stomach and chest. "I mean—it really shouldn't bother you." The tone of Rachel's voice indicated she knew she had caught them red-handed. "If you're girlfriends, then I'm sure you've done much more than a little rough kissing. Right?" The notion held an equal appeal and terror factor for her. Not in front of all these people, not in public, not here. She closed her eyes tight. Not ever, not anywhere. Lana loves Wendy, not me. We're just friends.

A heavy breath left Lana's parted lips; it chilled the wet mark on Mary Eunice's neck where she'd received the kiss. "Fuck." She removed her arms from her waist and nudged her, allowing Mary Eunice to slide out of her lap.

Rachel snorted. "You can lead a nun to a lesbian, but you can't make them kiss." She turned away and ordered a shot from Jasmine, filling her stomach with several back-to-back doses of liquid courage. "You sure about that dance, then? I did buy you a drink."

"I'll pass."

Earl groaned, rolling his eyes skyward. "For the love of god, Lana, dance with the girl! She clearly wants you—what the rest of us would give to have somebody who wants us—" He belched, and then he glanced over, past Mary Eunice and Lana to look at Rachel. "She likes Shakespeare. The sonnets are her favorites. Please, win her heart."

Wiggling her eyebrows, Rachel said, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

On reflex, Mary Eunice finished the stanza. "Thou art more lovely and more temperate." Lana ogled at her, and a blush flushed to her cheeks. "Sorry, I—I don’t even know where that came from." Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, and summer's lease hath all too short a date—stop. Stop. She bit her tongue, fighting to leave the poem incomplete and keep her mind focused on the conversation at hand.

A strange emotion reflected in Lana's deep brown eyes, dark as the soil, and she continued to gaze at Mary Eunice with a quirk upon her red-stained lips, something caught between pleasure and pain, affection and anguish; Mary Eunice's heart skipped in her chest. Is something wrong? Did I say something wrong? Is she okay? What if she has another attack?

Earl interrupted her thoughts. "Come on, Lana. Dance with the girl."

Lana jerked her head up, and the brief expression ebbed from her face, replaced with annoyance. "Would you dance with her?"
"I would dance with Herbert Hoover's rotting, disinterred corpse if it walked in here and bought me a drink—fuck, yes, I would dance with her! And I don't even like women!" A thick slur had come to Earl's voice, and he wiped his mouth with his handkerchief, dabbing away the sweat sheening his upper lip.

Jasmine gave Rachel another shot of whiskey, her third or fourth—Mary Eunice had stopped paying attention at some point—and she downed it in a loud gulp before she returned her eyes to Lana. "Come on. One dance. It's swing night. Just imagine, a lindy hop across this floor to some old jumble of Miller or Goodman." She arched an eyebrow. The alcohol had flushed her face and neck, but she remained beautiful nonetheless, much more impressive than anything Mary Eunice could have pulled off. "You could wash away your troubles a lot cheaper at home if you didn't want some company."

Resolve crumbling, Lana gave Mary Eunice a sideways look, regretful and doubtful. "Go with her," Mary Eunice encouraged. "I'll be fine." Jasmine nodded, offering an assurance that she would be at the bar—nothing could happen while she was there.

She lifted her head to regard Rachel again. "Fine." One hand rose from her lap, moving into Rachel's, and they both pushed away from the bar. But once she focused on Rachel in a different light, Lana's face broke out into a smile. She didn't hold the wry smile Mary Eunice knew best, but a different look, something purer and gentler and happier. Rachel makes her happy. I could never make her feel that way.

Her hand landed on the series of scabs on her left arm and dug at them with a fury. "Would you have done it?" Jasmine leaned over the counter, gazing at her with big, dark eyes. Mary Eunice blinked back at her, surprised at the address. She clarified, "Would you have made out with Lana to get Rachel to buzz off?"

Oh.

Mary Eunice pinched her forearm directly into one of the small, bleeding wounds, forcing herself to consider her words before she spoke. Yes. Without hesitation. I would have enjoyed it, and I don't know why, and I know it's wrong. Tears sprang to her eyes. She managed to bite them back, but Jasmine noticed; she tilted her head, wearing a look of concern in the wrinkles of her forehead. "If—if Lana found it preferable—then, yes, I would have."

She snorted, raising her eyebrows as she reclaimed the empty glasses Rachel and Lana had left behind and wiped off the countertop. Then, she leaned forward, resting on her forearms. "So, let me get this right. Hear me out." Mary Eunice nodded. "You're a nun, yes?" Mary Eunice nodded again. "And, as a nun, you like to pray, and you go to church, and you practice faithfully." Yes, I like to think so. Not as faithfully as I should. "But you also live with a lesbian—the most famous one in the city, I might add." She's the best part of my life. "And with her, you do batshit crazy things like vandalizing cars and showing up to a gay bar wearing the sexiest red lipstick and appealing blue dress you could squeeze yourself into, and you admit that you would stick your tongue down her throat if she asked you to. How do you square with that?"

Oh, no... Mary Eunice's mouth dried, and she gulped. She had no idea how to answer the blunt question. Jasmine wasn't hostile, only curious, but the sheer feeling of exposure didn't abate, and she wished more than anything she could tuck into her habit and wash the makeup from her face and retreat back to her Bible and Lana's arms in the safety of their bedroom. "I don't," she answered finally, staring hard at the countertop. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. I—I really don't square with anything." She picked at her arm more aggressively. The pain kept her in place. "Lana wouldn't leave me at home by myself, and she—she deserves to get out and be with her friends. I don't want her to be left out because we're friends."

"So—either Lana or Barb and Lois managed to convince you that you needed to come here, to an
illegal gay bar, in a trashy outfit.” Jasmine drummed her fingers on the wooden countertop, her thick fingertips thumping with each impact, fingernails bitten down to the quick and boasting no fingernail polish. "That still doesn't explain the making out."

Mary Eunice lifted her eyes up to Jasmine's, dark and intense. "If someone made Lana feel uncomfortable, or put her in danger, I would do anything in my power to make her feel better—to keep her safe. That's easy. I wouldn't even think about it."

Jasmine pursed her large lips, silent, but to her right, Earl said, "Damn, kid." He belched, holding his chin in his hand. "Sounds like you caught some feelings for Lana Winters." He waved his hand over his mug, looking pleadingly up at Jasmine.

She filled it once more, rolling her eyes. "I wouldn't go that far, honey. She is a nun."

Earl snorted. "This might surprise you, but nuns are actually human beings. They have human feelings and everything. They aren't robots with biblical storage devices in their heads. A nun is just as capable of falling in love as anyone else—Here, watch." He turned to face Mary Eunice. "Do you love Lana?"

"Of course I do." Earl sipped his beer, looking pointedly back up to Jasmine.

Waving a hand, Jasmine cut her off. "No—he's drunk, he doesn't understand that you're perfectly capable of loving someone without wanting to fuck them." Earl shook his head. "I love my parents, but you won't catch me crawling in bed with them."

"Right." Earl cleared his throat, and this time, he addressed her more politely. "Okay, sweetheart, since this lovely woman has just clarified the definitions of romantic and platonic love to me, a licensed professor with a doctorate—do you, or do you not, want to fuck Lana Winters?"

I don't know. I don't think so. Mary Eunice's face flushed as she considered what she had read in Wendy's journal, the only point of reference she had for sex between two women. Did she want to do that with Lana? No. I don't want to do that with anyone. Her tongue nervously darted across her lips, and she got a taste of the greasy lipstick slathered around her mouth, prompting her to sputter a delayed negation. "No—no."

"She thought about it," Earl said.

"He's right, you did think about it." They both stared at her, awaiting an explanation, and she didn't know how to begin providing, didn't know how to unearth everything she felt for Lana and explain it to two near-strangers. But as the music shifted, and Jasmine's eyes moved past her. "Look at that—it's Kat. I didn't know she was performing tonight." Mary Eunice spun around on her barstool to look at the rickety stage where a gorgeous black woman strode across in front of the band. She wore a long, deep green dress with loops over the shoulders, no sleeves, a plunging neckline, and a slit from the calf all the way up the thigh. Her hair sprang into a free afro. "She usually tells me."

Earl shrugged. "Maybe it's just a guest performance. It's already pretty late for her to just now be getting up there."

Who is she? Mary Eunice glanced to Jasmine, and she widened her eyes, quickly explaining, "Katherine is my cousin. She's a singer, but she usually takes bigger gigs than Pat and Joe can afford. Her type of performance is too popular." A curl of smoke came from Earl's newly lit cigar, wafting across Mary Eunice's nose. "I think she just keeps coming here because it's the only way to meet women."
"She's beautiful," Mary Eunice blurted, and both Earl and Jasmine chuckled, the former grumbling, "What's in a name? A dyke in any other habit would smell as gay—" but he stopped talking when the first few piano notes danced from the keyboardist, a simple and slow beat, a few chiming chords from the dancing fingers. Katherine soaked up the yellow lights upon her and moved freely in her space, high heels plunging into the wood as she held the microphone and flung the cord behind her.

The first notes floated forth, calm and peaceful and nothing Mary Eunice anticipated she would hear in a sparsely crowded gay bar. "Look at me," sang the performer as she strode back and forth. I am. I can't look at anything else. Likewise, almost every eye on the bar focused on her, fixed on her movements as the sweetest notes danced from her mouth. A thousand emotions quelled inside of Mary Eunice, rose and thrashed in her stomach with violence. The sounds moved her, but the words—they thrilled her.

"I get misty just holding your hand." Her eyes closed, and her mind vacated the bar, traveling far, far away from the present moment. Misty was a good word, one which quivered inside her with its rightness. She knew the feeling of mistiness. She felt it each time she curled beside Lana, the fog which filled her brain and overwhelmed her with love. The chords took her to the green hills of Eden in her mind, the scenarios of pure bliss playing like memories, things she longed for and would never grasp. "When I wander through this wonderland alone..." The tears pressed against the backs of her eyelids, and she refused to shed them, holding her eyes tightly closed until they had vanished. Don't be stupid. You're not alone. You have God, and you have Lana. The solitude inside her own head had never stung so much.

Katherine clutched the microphone, soaking up her space with her legs and long-strided movements. "I'm too misty and too much in love. I'm just too misty and too much in love." The emotions burned where they settled in her chest. It can't be. I'm not in love with her, I'm not. I don't even know what that feels like. I can't be in love with her. I'm not allowed. Who had ever invented that rule? Who had ordained that she could not love God and another person at the same time? It's not love—you're just confused. You're blasphemous.

The confusion pushed to the surface of her mind, and she hopped off of the barstool. "Excuse me—I'm sorry, I've got to go to the restroom—" Jasmine pointed her in the right direction. Behind her, Earl began to say, "Man, that woman, she can just really make you feel things, can't she?" but Mary Eunice bolted, following Jasmine's finger and darting into the bathroom. The shanty, dirty tile flooring and cement walls were lit by dim bulbs; as she pressed her back against the wall, sucking in deep breaths, the chilled silence of the room penetrated her heart. The first sob shuddered out of her chest.

Get out of here, go to a stall, you don't want anyone to see you like this... But her legs crumpled beneath her, rubbery at the knees, and she buried her face into her bare arms. The flickering lights exposed her, her near nudity in a beautiful blue dress she didn't deserve to sport, all of her vulnerabilities, but no one was there to see. Not even Lana.

The door swung open, and Mary Eunice leapt to her feet, scrubbing her face with one hand; the other pressed against the cold, firm wall to keep herself steady. But as it fell closed, Lois called out, "Sister Mary Eunice?" She pushed against the door and twisted the lock so no one else could intrude upon them, and after she swept the room with her eyes, she landed on Mary Eunice.

"What's wrong, baby? Did somebody hurt you?" No, I hurt myself. It didn't have anything to do with someone else. It would be easier.

Lois's embrace felt like sinking into bed at the end of a long day, swaddled in blankets and shielded from the cold of the world, and her face balled up as she shed another wracking sob. Her shoulders quaked. Lois let her slide back to the dirty tile floor and sat beside her, holding tight. "It's okay. Let it out. I know you're scared." The frigid floor stung her thighs where the skirt of her
dress rolled up. I'm so dirty. Plagued monsters danced through the front of her mind, all black and skeletal with glowing red eyes, the things she had seen in the mirror during her last days at Briarcliff. She pinched her eyes closed, but the shadows didn't abate behind them. "It's okay, I promise. Tell me what happened."

Her lips quivered where she tried to speak. "Nothing—Nothing. Nobody did anything." Something inhuman hissed right in her ear. She flinched and yelped, and Lois squeezed her tighter. Don't. It's not real. It's all in your head. "I'm just..." She didn't know the right word. Confused sounded right. So did sad for no reason, and so did afraid, so she finally settled on, "A little overwhelmed." Her jaws chattered.

"I know—it's scary your first time." Lois stroked her hair, the intricate braid hanging ragged where the locks had begun to come loose. "I thought Lana would stay with you." Her face screwed up again at the mention of Lana. Can we talk about anything else? She didn't want to think about the confused jumble of emotions inside her chest, the loving her and craving her and resisting those things because it wasn't right. But Lois read her face, lips pursing. "Did Lana do something to you?"

Mary Eunice shook her head. "No, no—of course not." She picked at the scabs on her upper arm, but Lois stilled her hand, taking it away from the scabs. She bit her lip as the tender touch brought to mind all of the times Lana had taken her hand, all of the ways Lana touched her, the way they held one another in bed, how they crooked together and lay against one another and laughed. "I'm just, I'm confused, it's too loud, I can't think, everything feels wrong—" She choked on her next heaving breath, and Lois shushed her out of her panic, pulling her nearer while she gasped for some steadiness. Each inhale stung her raw throat. Her eyes streamed. Memories flashed at her like crumbling bits of a life slipping between her fingers, pieces of a puzzle that came from a different box. Clara collapsed at her feet—Dr. Arden slapped her—Sister Jude laid the cane across her rump—the Monsignor rolled underneath her partially naked body— "I can't stop remembering!"

"Breathe, sweetie. Take a deep breath." Lois unspun her hair from the braids, letting it fall in curling ringlets. "You're okay. Calm down. Think of somewhere peaceful and happy." All of my happy places have Lana in them, and I can't think of her right now, I don't know how I feel. "Think of the beach. It's sandy and wet and warm—you can hear the ocean. In and out, the tide and the waves. You can wiggle your toes in the briney and feel the washed up seaweed. Watch the little baby sea turtles and the pretty fish." Lois's hands cupped her cheeks and chin, thumbs wiping away the remnants of her tears. "Breathe with the ocean, right? The waves, and wind, and the seagulls." The tingling numbness in her face abated as Lois massaged her skin, humming soft words until she managed to steady her breath again. "Can you tell me what's in your head?" No, I can't. I don't know where to start. I don't want you to think I'm crazy. I think I'm crazy. My head doesn't make any sense. "I won't judge you, I swear."

Mary Eunice's hands curled into fists, clutching Lois's ruffled blouse like a baby to a parent's finger. "I—" Her voice choked, and she almost couldn't reach around the thickness there in her throat. She had to gulp it down. Its bitterness floated in her stomach and sickened her. Voice dropping to an ashamed whisper, she said, "I was possessed." The final word branded her skin with angry welts, and she needed to pick the evil out of her blood, but Lois refused to relinquish her hand and let her scratch her bloodied left arm. "I—I don't remember most of what happened—it's all pieces, but it's still there." Her eyes fluttered closed. "I get so confused. Nothing feels the same anymore. I can't tell how I feel."

Long fingernails scraped against Mary Eunice's scalp and traced patterns. "I'm so sorry, baby." Lois's body was plumper and softer than Lana's, not drawn thin as a bone by starvation and mistreatment. "What is it that's got you so confused?" I don't know. I love Lana but I don't know
how I love her. It feels so wrong and right and awful and good at the same time. "You can tell me anything. I promise I won't tell anyone. Not even Lana or Barb. It's just between you and me."

Mary Eunice licked her lips, saliva thick in her mouth. Lois's large, golden brown eyes frightened her, so she avoided them and their honesty. "I don't understand how I feel about Lana," she admitted, words rushed and mumbled.

"What's confusing about her?" A frown quirked onto Lois's red-stained lips. "Are you jealous that she went with that other woman?"

"What?" Mary Eunice's eyes widened. "No—I came here so she would have fun, I'm not upset over that." She shook her head. Lois squeezed her hand, tracing the back off it with her thumb. "She's just—the first real friend I've ever had, and I love her so much, and I can't tell if it's right, it's so strange."

Lois smiled, a small and delicate thing, confused and probing. "What do you mean, you can't tell if it's right?"

Mary Eunice's eyes darted away, shocked at the revelation, and she scratched at her cheek to avoid Lois's gaze. A series of bumps had raised on her cheekbones, and she frowned at the little lumps on her skin. "Oh, no." Lois batted her hand away. "Let me see—oh, goodness, you're getting a rash. Here, get up, get up." Lois tugged her to her feet and hurried her to one of the dirty ceramic sinks, taking a paper towel and wetting it. "Do you have skin allergies?"

"I—I, uh, don't know?"

"Right. That was a stupid question." Lois sponged the foundation off of her face with the paper towel. "I'm taking all of this off. Do your eyes burn at all? I don't want them to swell up." Mary Eunice shook her head while Lois piddled around in her purse and pulled out a tube of cream. "I've got moisturizer and some anti-itch cream. Let me just—" Somebody pounded on the locked bathroom door. "Just a minute!"

She massaged the cream into Mary Eunice's skin and let it sit before she retreated to the door and let in two giggling older women, all tangled in one another and streaking the lipstick from one face to another. Mary Eunice watched them, curious, as the shorter one pinned the taller against the wall and ground up against her, eliciting a dark moan. Lois chuckled, inclining her eyebrows. "That's typical. They'll go in one of the stalls before the clothes come off." She went back to rubbing the cream into Mary Eunice's cheekbones. "They can only meet here—they both have husbands at home." As she had said, the two women dragged at each other into the largest bathroom stall and slammed it in their wake, locking it. "Does that burn?"

Mary Eunice shrugged. "Not really." The itching dissipated as Lois's fingertips pressed the last of the cream into her skin. She blinked at her reflection in the mirror; the face washing had taken the tears from her cheeks and the redness from her eyes, leaving only the slightly streaked lipstick on her mouth and the red flushes of rash on her cheeks. She looked normal here in her short blue dress. She blended in. "Thank you."
Lois grinned back at her. "That's what sisters are for." She pitched the paper towels she had soiled. "Come on. Do you want to sit with Earl again? I know you know him." Mary Eunice nodded; she didn't want to introduce any more unfamiliar faces to this already volatile night. "Alright. I'll stay with you for awhile."

Back out in the bar, the band continued to project its sounds, Katherine swaying on the stage as one song transitioned into another with a more excitable beat. Lois hopped onto the stool Lana had occupied earlier. Jasmine approached, greeting her with a wink. "Hey, doll. It's about time you came around to your own kind." Lois blew a kiss in return, and Jasmine turned to appraise Mary Eunice. "Good lord, what happened to your face?"

"She had a makeup rash. It's all good now."

"If you say so. Do you want something to drink?"

"Give me something fun and fruity."

"Coming right up."

Earl sat, silent, gazing up at the wall with the utmost interest; his mug was empty again, and he greeted Lois and Mary Eunice with a vague grunt. Lois chuckled, and she turned on her stool to regard the dance floor. "Won't you look at that," she hummed. Mary Eunice followed her gaze to middle of the room where Lana and Rachel had tangled in one another, steps swinging loosely as the band introduced "It Don't Mean a Thing" and the people either followed along or got out of the way. "Lana loves swing."

Once she had her drink, Lois sipped at it, and Mary Eunice's gaze wandered from the inventive improvisational dance to the singer on the stage again, how she moved, how her tongue framed each beat and syllable, shoes shuffling on the wooden boards. Lana and Rachel spun and dipped one another, clumsily colliding a few times with their drunkenness but inevitably scooping back into the beat of the song. The magic shed off of them. Lana's bright smile flashed in the lights whenever they circled under a bulb. "She looks really happy."

Lois snorted. "She looks really drunk." She drank more from her glass, swishing it around in her mouth with deep thought before she swallowed. She shook her head. "You should have seen her dancing with Wendy. That was something special."

A throb of pain rocked through Mary Eunice's heart. "She misses her a lot. Wendy should be here instead of me. I wish it was. I wish I had never met Lana. Her hands wrung in front of her body as she mused on the thought, the prospect of taking Wendy's place in the grave—she would have done it in a heartbeat to restore Lana's broken spirit, heal her broken heart, mend all of the wounds on her soul.

Lois hummed, sympathetic and thoughtful. "We all do." She traced the rim of her glass with her fingertip. "Especially Barb." Her big brown eyes wandered to Lana on the dance floor with Rachel, and then they shifted to Katherine on the stage, illuminated by all of the dumpy, dirty lights. "They were each other's first, back when Lana and I still thought we could dick around with men and get by." She chuckled, inclining her eyebrows. "That phase didn't last very long for either of us. Me, longer than Lana. I was the last one to get some sense."

She sipped her drink as she considered. Her lips twisted, and Mary Eunice watched the red line of her mouth shift up and down as she shook her head. She's very pretty. The bar lights cast her red hair in a strawberry hue. She was more conventionally pretty than Lana, wearing more makeup, but there was something missing, a burble in the pit of her belly that Lois simply didn't give her. "You know—this will probably sound kinda, kinda crazy to you. And you'll think it's because I'm
a little drunk, and it probably is. But I am so glad—and I mean, so fucking glad—that my life turned out the way it did. That every piece fell where it did so that I could love the most wonderful woman, and I'm never—I mean, I'm never going to be obligated to marry a man, or have his children, or be his neat little polite housewife. That must be really hard, for somebody who isn't sure of themselves yet, to understand, and I didn't choose to be this way. I didn't choose to love Barb. But if I got to choose—if God looked at me and asked me if I wanted to magically love men, I would choose to stay with Barb in this life. I would take her over any alternative. I don't think I could ever possibly be happier with a man, even if I loved him.”

I understand. Or, I think I do. Mary Eunice wasn't certain she could speak that aloud and mean it, so she remained silent, but as she mulled over the topic, she pictured herself with Lana, the way they had lived since emerging from Briarcliff. Could a man ever lighten her heart the way Lana did? Could anyone? She had only felt those particular sensations a few times before in her life, and all of the other times, she had been wrapped in prayer. Lana was the closest thing to holiness she grasped these days. Lois turned to look at her, smiling in the dim light. "I'm glad you're here. Not here, as in at Pat Joe's, but—here, with us. I think you're very special." She leaned over to smack a quick kiss on Mary Eunice's cheek, wet and greasy with the lipstick.

"I did not just see you kiss Lana's nun." As they turned back, Jasmine arched an eyebrow at them. "Hm? What are you doing, sticking your lips on her face? Naughty girl, Lois. I might tell Lana all about your transgressions."

Mary Eunice rushed to defend her harmless actions. "It's no big deal—Lana does it all the time."

Shouldn't have said that. Jasmine, Earl, and Lois all choked, Earl spitting out a string of saliva which he fought to catch. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. "No way—No fucking way, Lana Winters does not kiss you on a regular basis—" His speech slurred, rolling off of his stiff tongue like a cramped muscle. "There's no way, I refuse to accept it, you speak a language of lies! You, you religious charlatan, with your bloody—indulgences—it's all a scam for us to keep our heads down and follow the natural order and keep the top dogs on top…"

Everyone ogled at him, Mary Eunice quirking her eyebrows as she fought to discern his tangled speech and make sense of his criticism. But Jasmine shrugged it off. "He's very drunk," she said, "as if you weren't perfectly capable of figuring that out on your own." She drummed her fingers on the counter. "But really? All the time?" Mary Eunice nodded. "Even when she hasn't been drinking and doesn't have that little shred of liquid courage?" Again, she nodded. "Hm. Very strange—" Jasmine paused mid-sentence as she gazed down the bar. "Lois, darling, I hate to cut this short, but it looks as though the love of your life has fallen asleep on my bar, and no one seems to know how to wake her." She frowned. "I only served her two drinks."

"Oh, dear," Lois sighed. "No, it wasn't the alcohol—she hasn't slept in days." She glanced back to Mary Eunice. "Stay put. I'll come back for you." She hopped off of the barstool and hurried toward where Barb had dozed off on the counter.

The music hopped abruptly into the first beats of "In the Mood". Mary Eunice turned her head to look at the stage, seeking Katherine, but the woman had left the stage, not visible anywhere among the crowd. Disappointment filled her chest. I didn't get to watch her as much as I wanted. If she had known Katherine was only going to perform a few songs, she would have paid more attention. But the playing of the popular song had drawn out everyone to the dance floor, so she also couldn't spot Lana or Rachel; the crowd granted them anonymity.

A flash of dark green caught her sight, and she lifted her head to gaze directly up at Katherine. "Hey." She grinned. Her frizzy hair bounced on her shoulders, defying gravity. She's really pretty. It didn't strike her as an afterthought like it had with Lois; everything about Katherine was influential and provocative and downright gorgeous. "Mind if I sit here?" Dumbstruck and silent,
Mary Eunice shook her head. "Cool." She hauled up the skirt of her dress behind her as she plopped onto the seat of the stool. "Do you always just stare blankly at people when they sit down next to you, or is it something to do with me?"

Mary Eunice choked. "Um—" Katherine raised her eyebrows, and embarrassment flushed into her gut. "I—uh, I'm sorry."

"I know I'm doing something right when a white woman looks at me that way." Heat coursed to Mary Eunice's cheeks, and she closed her eyes, wishing more than anything she could melt to get out of this woman's massive presence. The area around her warmed and intensified. "Darling, you look absolutely terrified. Jazz, why haven't you given this woman a drink?" Earl muttered under his breath a slur about nuns not drinking, but Katherine didn't hear him, both eyes fixed on Mary Eunice. "C'mon, now. What's your name? I haven't seen you around here in awhile. Didn't know what it was I was missing out on, apparently."

She blinked, deep. Embarrassment refused to shake itself out of her chest and stomach. "I—I'm Mary Eunice."

Katherine grinned, a broad, white thing on her teeth; she carried a gap between her first two, and deep red lipstick stained her mouth, catching the light. "You go by both names, then, I guess?" Mary Eunice nodded. "That's sweet. Now, tell me, Mary Eunice—what kind of drink do you want me to buy you?"

"Um, I, er, I don't drink."

"Have you ever made a sentence without stuttering over it?" she berated herself internally, kicking her feet above the ground. Katherine made her feel exposed and frightened, but she couldn't repel herself from the intense gravity of the other woman.

Earl muttered, "You're playing with fire, girl. Talking up a white woman's like petting a drooling dog. Nine times outta ten, dog's just hungry. Tenth time, dog's got rabies."

"I think I know plenty about talking up white women. More than you would, anyway. Mary Eunice wouldn't kick a dog if it did have rabies. She looks like she ain't stepped far out from under her mama's skirts yet." Katherine cleared her throat, and she regarded Mary Eunice again. "Now, sugar, lemme guess. You wound up here with a couple of your friends for a good time, and they all went their separate ways, and you're hanging out here where it's kinda safe and quiet."

Mary Eunice bobbed her head, unable to stop agreeing with every word coming out of Katherine's mouth. "So how about you let me buy you a drink, and then I'll give you a ride home with me, and we can have some fun."

Earl turned his head, mouth opened in an incredulous gape, and he began to sputter, "Girl, do you know—" but Jasmine cut him off, interrupting with, "No—let them figure it out. Stay out of their business."

At their tangled words, Mary Eunice frowned with confusion, eyes dancing from one to the other, but Katherine hummed to gain her attention again, and she looked back up at her like a student listening aptly in class. "I would love to, but I can't. I have to go home with my friends."

Katherine pursed her lips, and she leaned forward. "Give me a dance, and maybe I'll be able to change your mind?" A dance? I don't know how to dance! "Oh, honey, you're looking like I'm some kinda snake about to bite you. Most dykes come here and know what they're looking for."

Earl chuckled to Mary Eunice's right, but he disguised it, coughing into his sleeve. Katherine reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out a flower, a little smashed, but petals deep purple. "Here. You get a violet." She spun it between her fingertips before she tucked
the stem behind Mary Eunice's ear, curling a lock of her hair over it. "Perfect." Her grin softened into a genuine smile. "So, who you here with? If you ain't drinking, and you ain't dancing, then you must have some hella friends."

"Oh—" Mary Eunice licked her lips. "I came with Lana and Lois and Barb."

She ogled a moment, blinking hard. "Lana Winters?"

"Uh—yeah…"

"Well, goddamn. You must be the little bitch who fucked up Todd's Lamborghini." The abrupt vulgarity took Mary Eunice aback, and terror pooled in her stomach at the prospect of having angered Katherine; she hated to think of receiving the blunt end of anyone's fury, especially after seeing what Lana thought was appropriate for revenge. "You're a fucking legend, you know? Putting a fist up the man's ass and all that."

"I'm right here," said Earl, and she rolled her eyes, brushing him off.

Mary Eunice managed a weak grunt. "I, uh, I didn't really… It was mostly Lana. I was just with her." And I had a hammer, so it happened that I shattered a few windows. "It, it wasn't really a big deal."

"Nah, kid, it was a huge deal," Earl dissuaded. He pushed back from the bar with a belch. "Uh, by the way, the violet—that's a symbol of sapphic desire. Coming from Sappho, a Greek poetess, who lived on the island of Lesbos, giving us the modern terms sapphic and lesbian—good god, I'm too drunk for queer theory. I'm out, folks."

"Drive safe!" Jasmine wished, and he staggered away from them, back toward the steps and out of sight. She flashed a grin to Mary Eunice and Katherine, but someone waved at her from farther down the bar, and she scurried away to aid them.

Before Mary Eunice and Katherine could engage more, though, Lois appeared behind her. "Hey, babe—oh, hi, Kat!" The black woman waved in a noncommittal greeting to Lois. "We've gotta go. Barb is falling asleep, and Lana's panties are going to wind up being discovered in an empty bottle of vodka if we don't take her and Rachel somewhere more private."

What? Mary Eunice peered over the bar; Lana and Rachel had, in fact, been the ones to summon Jasmine, and they each took another shot before they dove into one another's faces again. A cold ball of dread sank down into the pit of her stomach at the sight, red streaks of lipstick all over Rachel's jaws and bruises on her neck where Lana had left her mark. "I'm really not that drunk," Barb was repeating, "I swear, I'm just exhausted—"

"You're still not driving—will someone please herd Lana and Rachel toward the exit?" At Lois's instruction, Mary Eunice and Barb both approached, but Barb had a better idea of guiding them off of the bar, while Mary Eunice followed, dumb and silent at the occasional burst of giggles from Lana or Rachel. Lois headed up the rickety staircase first, Lana and Rachel stumbling after her, and Mary Eunice tiptoed after, allowing Barb to follow.

Barb swatted her hind end, and she flinched in surprise. "Sorry. I had to take my shot while Lana's too drunk to kick my ass." Barb yawned, fanning over her open mouth. "Look—I know you're, like, scared to death of me, and I don't blame you one bit. But I really wouldn't hurt you. There's only one lady for me. The rest is all a show." She gave Mary Eunice a respectful nod and smile, but the awful sensation in her stomach didn't dissipate. There isn't a lady for me. But I love her nonetheless. Tucking her arms around herself, she uttered a silent prayer as she followed the group out into the cool night air.
Chapter End Notes

Song lyrics from Ella Fitzgerald's "Misty"
For I Am Faint with Love

Chapter Notes

Song of Songs 2:5

Trigger warning for sexual assault on this chapter. (I'm assuming everyone is prepared for that, given the tags and the nature of the story, but just in case.)

Sorry for the short length; I felt, as is, the chapter formed a complete thought, so I left it.

Thanks for reading!

The giggling of Rachel and Lana in the backseat, drunken and slurred and muffled into one another's mouths, made Mary Eunice's stomach flip. Barb had drifted off to sleep again, resting her head on Mary Eunice's shoulder. "Sorry," Lois said from behind the steering wheel. "She should've known that alcohol's a depressant. As tired as she was—she should've known it was going to knock her out." A little bit of drool trickled out of the corner of her mouth onto Mary Eunice's blue dress. The support there made Mary Eunice's stomach flush and fill with warm affection for Lois and somewhat for Barb as well, though parts of her were still intimidated by the short brunette.

The face of Lana's house had never looked so bleak and discouraging. Mary Eunice and Lois glanced in the rearview mirror to find Rachel pinned underneath Lana, their mouths latched onto one another. The skirt of Rachel's dress was bunched up beneath her buttocks, and Lana framed her face between her forearms. "Hey, girls," Lois called, "you're home." Rachel planted a hand on Lana's collarbones and pushed back, and they disentangled themselves from one another, Lana fumbling for the door handle. Dread pooled in Mary Eunice's gut as she reached for the door handle. "Sister?" Lois interrupted, peering past Barb. "You can come home with us if you want. We have an empty room. Those two aren't going to be off of each other for a few hours, and I'm sure you want to have somewhere to sleep."

Yeah, that would be nice. Mary Eunice closed her eyes. She couldn't abandon Lana like that; she couldn't bring herself to do it, not knowing Lana was intoxicated, uncertain about Rachel's trustworthiness. "I'll be okay," she murmured, not fully trusting her own word. "Thank you."

"Alright." Lois also didn't look completely convinced. "We'll call in the morning to make sure everything's okay. If something happens, call me. I'll come get you. No matter what time it is. Okay?" Mary Eunice nodded. Lois's insistence touched her. "Have a good night. Don't let the lesbians bite—you or each other." She winked teasingly as Mary Eunice blushed and crawled after Lana and Rachel.

She trotted across the dewy, dark lawn to the front door where Lana and Rachel deliberated. "Just open the door, babe, it's freezing," Rachel moaned.

"I'm too drunk to stick it in the hole!"

This sent Rachel tumbling into giggles. "I hope that's not true between the sheets—"
Mary Eunice's cheeks flushed when she realized what Rachel meant, and she shuffled between them, separating them with her body; she didn't want any neighbors to peer outside to see Lana kissing another woman on the front stoop. "Lana, that's your car key. Here, let me." She took the keyring from Lana's whirling hand and moved to the house key. As Lana reached past her for Rachel's waist, the pit of her stomach swelled with some terrible, sad emotion; she kept her eyes down to the keyhole. The freezing night air made her hand tremble. "Don't," she dissuaded. "Someone might see."

Lana rolled her eyes, callous and frustrated. "Good god, you sound like Wendy." The sharp remark branded Mary Eunice's insides, and she popped the door open. Lana dragged Rachel into the house, and Gus barreled toward them. "It's okay—he won't bite'cha." Lana managed these words before she flung herself at Rachel once more. Rachel bounced off of the wall where Lana slammed her, one hand sliding up her thigh, shoving the skirt of her dress out of the way; neither appeared to care the spectacle they made of themselves in front of Mary Eunice.

She locked the door behind her and whistled for Gus to distract him from where he tried to insert himself between Rachel and Lana. "Come here, boy." He whined when Lana ignored him before he followed Mary Eunice, and she filled his kibble bowl, where he bent and began to scarf down the meal. "Good." At her praise, he wagged his tail, enthusiastic, but he didn't lift his head from his bowl.

Around the corner, the sounds of Rachel gasping and moaning reached her. Mary Eunice's face screwed up. It was too much like living with Aunt Celest, an unfamiliar man moaning through the wall while she shushed the other children and tucked them back into bed, encouraged them to pray through the disturbance so they might find some peace. But now, she had no company at all except Gus, who didn't care that Lana had tangled herself into another woman. "God, Lana, fuck, yes!"

Mary Eunice's face burned in shame. Something else boiled in her stomach—not the frigid, sorrowful disappointment, but something much hotter and more vicious. Jealousy. Her eyes burned with tears. She didn't deserve to be jealous. Lana had done so much for her, had provided for her, had sheltered her and fed her and doted on her through her illness, and yet it wasn't enough for her greedy heart. What else could she expect Lana to give? She couldn't accept sex; the mere prospect filled her with shame. Even romantic love was forbidden. Would she force Lana into a life of celibacy because of her own unrequited love?

The title, unrequited love, named the awful sensations she'd had all night, and she covered her face with her hands. I'm in love with Lana. The reality of it crumbled inside of her, made her sink, arms catching herself on the counter. The tears dribbled from the corners of her eyes. I can't be in love. Oh, what am I going to do? Rachel growled, throaty voice distinct from Lana's lisp, and then she sputtered, "Are you gonna take me to the goddamn bedroom or not?"

"Yes, yes, o' course." A brief silence followed, but then Lana said, "Nuh-No, door open." Rachel's response wasn't audible; Lana replied, "Always leave the doors open—so we can hear 'nd see each other, if something happens, or so we don't get scared."

"Scared of what? The boogeyman?" Rachel asked, loud and incredulous.

"Scared of fucking serial killers and demons, you idiot!"

Mary Eunice recoiled at Lana's sharp words, stabbed by the truth, how they had learned to protect one another from the recesses of their own minds, the coping mechanisms they'd devised to maintaining some semblance of jollity and normality. Please, God, help me. Tears rolled freely down her cheeks. In creating this normalcy, what Lana was most accustomed to, she had fallen too deep into her appointed role, and now she had no idea how to crawl out of it. I can't do this...
alone. She couldn't bring this up to Father Joseph—no, it was reserved for confession alone. No one of faith would advise her adequately. If she told Father Joseph, it would consume their sessions; she hardly knew the priest at the parish, and all of the Sisters she had known through Briarcliff and her order had been reassigned; she didn't even know where to call to contact her Mother Superior.

Gus butted his head against her leg and whined, sensing her troubled heart, and she whimpered before her hand made it to her mouth to muffle her sobs. He guided her back to the couch; when she sat down, he hopped up into her lap, stretching across her legs. He rested his head on her abdomen, gazing up at her with those loving brown eyes, filled with undeserved adoration. Her heart wrenched. When the next moans rose from the bedroom, she curled up with her head on the arm of the chair, hands over her ears to try and block out the sound of the woman she loved engaging with another.

Lana dragged Rachel to the bed. Her breath tasted like cigarettes, but she had the most beautiful blonde hair and glowing blue eyes, glazed and bloodshot with her alcoholic consumption. In her drunken haze, Rachel's face kept blending into Mary Eunice's; if Lana closed her eyes, she could imagine she kissed Mary Eunice instead, as long as she ignored the rough tobacco smoke clinging to her breath. It wasn't as noticeable when she moved from Rachel's mouth to her neck. Her lips roamed the delicate expanse of pale skin. She sank her teeth into the pulse point. The heart throbbed back against her tongue, pounding into her mouth, and she sucked hard. She wanted to mark her as her own.

But, freed from Lana's mouth, Rachel could speak again. "Fuck, yes—don't fucking stop, that's so good." The coarse, vulgar language shook Lana from her fantasy, and she paused to ground herself. The thoughts conflicted, Not Mary Eunice, warring with, Pretend, pretend, pretend. "Why'd you stop? Are you tryin'a fuckin' tease me?" I can't deal with that.

She detached her mouth from Rachel's neck. "Said you used to be a hooker, yeah?" Rachel's face creased with vexation, but she nodded. "Do you mind if we do a li'l roleplay?"

This caught Rachel's attention, and she wiggled her eyebrows. "Oh, somebody's kinky!" She grabbed Lana by her hair and tugged her head back, forking a knee between her thighs and grinding. Lana gasped at the pressure, the squelching in the wetness on her labia, the wailing from her clitoris for more, more friction. "What kinda roleplay you got in mind?" Rachel curled up from the pillows and nibbled on Lana's earlobe, her teeth clicking against the small studded ring there. "Do you wanna call me mommy?"

"No—"

"Want me to call you mommy?"

Lana blanched at that prospect. "No!" Her vehement protest silenced Rachel's teasing words, and she screwed up her face to shut out the flashbacks—but, to her surprise, they didn't come rolling at her, stifled by her drunkenness. "No," she repeated, softer. "I want'cha to pretend to be a nun. My nun." My nun. A big, silly, drunken smile spread across her lips, and she shrugged Rachel's hands out of her hair to stroke her cheeks in turn. "Can you do that for me?"

Rachel giggled. "That's not kinky," she said. "That's just really sad." Lana's face flushed. I know it's sad, but it's what I want. "Sure—I'll do it. Call me Mary Eunice." She kissed Lana's smile again, and her expression turned into one of nervous innocence. "Will you touch me?" she requested in the lightest of voices. Lana squelched her embarrassment as she pressed a delicate kiss to her lips once more, and she used feather-light touches to flutter over the body beneath her
Lana's parted lips landed on Mary Eunice's jaw and smattered downward, leaving sloppy streaks of saliva in her wake. Long white arms fumbled to latch around her neck, unzipping her dress. It pooled around Lana's shoulders; she paid no heed to shed it the rest of the way as she caught onto a collarbone. "Up," she prompted, tugging at Mary Eunice's torso. Mary Eunice complied, sitting up enough for Lana to unzip her dress in the back. It cascaded from her, and Lana pulled it up by the skirt, hurling it over her head. The haphazard movement made it collide with the wall; she couldn't pick it out of the shadows. Mary Eunice tugged at Lana's dress in turn. Rapid-fire pulse in Lana's neck and wrists refused to allow her to still. A tremble punctuated her hands. Mary Eunice fought to free her arms from the sleeves; the moment the weight of the dress vanished from Lana's neck, she dove onto the exposed expanse of chest.

The brassiere fell away under clawing, drunken hands, fumbling and pawing at the rosebud bosom. "You're so beautiful." Mary Eunice cried out as Lana's mouth wrapped around one of her nipples, hands pinching and teasing the other one. Her back arched, pushing more of her breast into Lana's mouth. "Mm," Lana hummed in encouragement. Delicate hands wrapped into her hair and tugged, holding her face in place. Lana mopped across her chest with a string of sloppy kisses to awaken the other breast. Each tug at her hair flashed lightbulbs across her memory; they flicked on and off like matches, lighting and dying in random appearances.

"What's wrong with me?" Electricity crackled behind her eyes. The sound of zapping, a bird on a telephone line disappearing into a cloud of feathers, echoed in her ears.

"Oh, Lana! Oh!" gasped Mary Eunice. She pressed a thumb into the other woman's navel, and Mary Eunice yelped, "Oh, my word!" Her undulating hips ground against the air, against nothing in particular. Lana ripped the panties away and left them tangled around one ankle. Mary Eunice flung them away with a kick. Lana sank her teeth into the tender inner flesh of Mary Eunice's thigh. Another sharp intake of breath followed, a source of praise. She hooked her arms around each leg and burrowed her face into the mound of sweat-dampened pubic hair. Her tongue slicked up one lip and down the other, all the folds glistening with arousal, which emerged in acidic strings, clinging to her tongue like a syrup. "Oh, yes! Please!" The wanton pelvis ground against Lana's face. The hands in her hair pushed her deeper into the sheer, overwhelming scent and taste of pure woman. "Please, I need you!"

It took no great search for Lana to find the large nub of Mary Eunice's clitoris, swollen from her sheer arousal. Lana wrapped her mouth around it and sucked. Sounds rewarded her. The zapping within her skull deafened her to the voice of her lover, but she flicked the tip of her tongue over the nub of Mary Eunice's clitoris. Her vagina seized and tightened with the stimulus. "Oh, yes!" choked out Mary Eunice, lifting her ass off of the bed and into Lana's mouth for her to devour with more reckless abandon. "Yes—fuck, Lana, yes!"

Though Rachel's expletive interrupted Lana's fantasy, she didn't stop; she didn't want to ruin a good orgasm. She wrapped her mouth around the clitoris and sucked. "Yes—Fuck—Yes! Yes!" She arched her back off of the bed, moaning and thrashing, her hands tangled up in the sheets and blankets, pulling hard, thrusting her hips into the air. "Mm...Ngh!" All of the muscles in her thighs tensed and then relaxed. Her toes uncurled. Wetness trickled from her vagina, more than before, clear and sticky. "Oh—oh, that was good." She took Lana by the hair, tugged her face out from between her legs and guided her back up to her face. She planted a kiss on her lips, and she narrowed her eyes. "Your turn, darling." Mary Eunice called me cupcake, Lana wanted to correct, but instead, she nodded, dumbstruck and silent.

With the flat palm of one hand, Mary Eunice pushed Lana onto the bed, head cradled in the pillows, back on the mattress. Her racing heart and heaving chest refused to calm. "You're so pretty..." Mary Eunice's tongue dashed across her lips to wet them before she kissed down Lana's
"Teach me—I wanna make you feel good, too, baby." Lana cringed at the word and hissed, drawing her hands into fists in the sheets. A firm knee planted between her legs and ground there through her underwear, the pressure erotic and stressful in the same turn. She clenched her eyes closed, but flashes of light glinting on horn-rimmed glasses greeted her. Gasping, her expression fluttered wide again. "Oh, somebody really wants it…" Mary Eunice batted her eyelashes like an innocent little doll.

Lana's awareness blurred. With each moment of her increasing arousal, her anxiety rose in turn; moans and gasps and yelps tumbled from her mouth in strings, and she didn't know if she wanted Mary Eunice to stop or continue, didn't know if she vocalized distress or pleasure or something wrapped up in the middle of the two. A hot mouth landed on her right nipple. It snatched her from her reverie; her hands shoved Mary Eunice's face away. "Not there—" She sucked in a sharp breath. Confusion quirked across her lover's face. "Use your hands, if you must." Still, the waterfall of blonde hair threatened to change colors, to shorten; the delicate, pale hands had a coarser touch. Her breath hitched in her chest. *Go somewhere else.*

"I don't want to do this anymore. She didn't dare contradict her lover, hands roaming her bosom, mouth slipping farther down her stomach, between her legs.

"Go somewhere with Mary Eunice." But Mary Eunice's mouth closed around her wet vulva, tongue roaming. Lana shuddered. She could focus on no happy place of prayer when the woman she loved caused her such erotic pain. *It isn't her. It's someone else—* Lana's clouded mind struggled for clarity as the lips wrapped around her clitoris and suckled. "Oh!" Her body clenched in some mixture of protest and nearing the edge of a cliff; she walked the plank off of a pirates' ship into the swirling ocean waters below, except the ocean was euphoric struggle for her own sanity. Teeth nipped at her. She arched her back. "Fuck!" *Who?* She couldn't remember. Her furious, hot orgasm crowned inside her body. "Mary Eunice! Fuck, Mary Eunice! Mary Eunice!" She shouted the name as her body seized, her vagina contracting in rings of fire. Tears slipped out of her eyes, but she dashed them away with the back of her fist as the white flash of pleasure dissipated, stabbing a hot knife of pain into her gut.

"Shit," Rachel said, immediately losing character as she crawled up beside Lana. As she brushed up against her, she tensed, repulsed at the touch. *I don't want you to be here right now.* Her jaw and tongue wouldn't stop trembling, and she couldn't stabilize her breath or her pounding heart. But Rachel didn't notice. "I hope she didn't hear you. That would be awkward as all fuck." She flopped on her belly beside Lana, and the mattress quivered with the force of her landing. "Are you okay?" Lana managed to jerk a nod. *Please, just go away.* Disgust twisted inside her stomach when Rachel's hands brushed her arm. "What happened here? This long cut?"

"Got cut."

"By what?"

"By a hooker having speed withdrawals on my lawn."

Rachel burst out laughing at her blunt answer, but Lana found no humor in it as the memory of Celest surfaced, tangled with a flash of Bloody Face, mashed with Wendy lying in bed beside her. Rachel hummed. "And the stitches, on your belly? What happened there? They're not even done healing yet."

*Oh, please, for the love of god, just shut the fuck up.* "Had surgery. Uterine perforation."

The other fell quiet for a moment, long enough for Lana to suspect she had fallen asleep, but when she opened her eyes, Rachel was just watching her through her blue eyes, concerned and happy and flushed, floating in the pleasant, post-orgasm haze. *Why don't I feel that?* She had hoped the
orgasm would relieve her panicking symptoms, but it instead left her alone in them, fighting for some better fantasy to help her ground herself. **Stop panting. Slow your breathing. In your nose, out your mouth.** "Mind if I get up and grab a glass of water?"

"Guh-Go ahead. In the kitchen." As Rachel tumbled out of the bed, Gus trotted down the hall, past her, and leapt into the bed to join Lana. "Hey—Hey, buddy." He crawled up beside her and flattened her to the bed, pressing on her chest as he licked her face. "Good boy. Good boy." His cold, wet nose against her cheek made her gasp in surprise. She focused on the distraction he provided. "Good job."

Mary Eunice paced in the kitchen, face redder than the bottle of ketchup in the fridge, shame and confusion boiling inside of her. I shouldn't have been listening. I shouldn't have heard. But she did hear. She had heard Rachel cry out, and that had filled her with a vicious and green envy, and then she had heard Lana scream—scream her name, not Rachel's, not Wendy's, but hers. She burbled from the inside out, almost expecting her skin to erupt into hives. Her hands refused to still where they fidgeted. Had Lana fantasized about her? Was it just a mistake? Was she too drunk to tell Rachel apart from her? Mary Eunice hadn't a clue. Just forget it. Lana probably won't remember it at all, and if she does, she won't bring it up. Pretend it didn't happen. She leaned against the counter, staring down the drain of the sink, half wishing for a snake to crawl up out of it so she had something else to think about. Hours had passed since she last ate, but instead of hunger, she felt nothing but nausea.

The abrupt clearing of a throat drew her attention, and she jerked up to see Rachel in the doorway of the kitchen, naked from head to toe. **Oh no.** A knowing smirk crossed Rachel's face, her blue eyes glowing, blonde hair tousled, hips cocked outward as she appraised Mary Eunice. She was pink in the face and chest. "Hey, sugar," Rachel greeted. Her wide, white-toothed smile could have become a snarl with the simple flex of her lips. "You look shocked. Have you never seen a naked woman before?"

Dumbstruck into silence, Mary Eunice shook her head, fighting her eyes' urge to roam the whole of Rachel's exposed body; her efforts failed as she drank in the sight of the large, plush breasts, topped by rosebud nipples. "Do you like my tits?" Mary Eunice jerked her gaze back up to Rachel's. "It's okay. You can say yes." She swayed on her feet as she approached. "You can look. Don't be afraid. God isn't going to smite you on the spot, I promise. I've been looking at titties since I was fourteen."

Mary Eunice closed her eyes tightly. "Can I get you something?" she asked, voice trembling like someone stepped on thin ice and waited for it to shatter underfoot.

Closing her eyes on Rachel was a mistake. Two naked arms seized her around the waist and tugged her against the bare torso, strong and giggling. "Lana would really like it if you came to bed with us," she said, her smirk taking no rejection. "C'mon, babe. I wanna see the look on her pretty face when she sees you crawl in beside her." **No, no.** Mary Eunice dug in her heels, refusing to move, but Rachel took her by the arms. "Oh, baby, it's okay, we'll show you—there's nothing to be afraid of." She smoothed a hand down the flat of Mary Eunice's back, reaching for the hem of her dress. She slapped one of her buttcheeks and squeezed; Mary Eunice cried out in response. "Ah, darling, I knew you would be a little kinky. Come with me."

"No." The word hardly held Mary Eunice's conviction, a weak tremble. "No, no, I don't want to—I don't want to go with you, please, please don't make me, I won't, I can't—" Nothing she said deterred Rachel's hands from scouring her body, fondling her breasts and her rump and her ticklish abdomen. "Please, stop," she repeated as the hand trailed down the fabric of her outer thigh and vanished under her skirt.

Breath punctuated by the reek of cigarette smoke wafted over her face. Rachel's lips grabbed hers,
hot and suckling. Her body slammed against Mary Eunice's, pinned her against the wall of the kitchen. Mary Eunice retreated into the crevice between the wall and the counter. *I don't want to do this, I don't want it!* She tried to wrench her face away, but Rachel lifted one hand to her hair and fisted, holding her in place; the other hand combed up under her dress, brushed her fuzzy inner thigh, and found the elastic band of her panties. Mary Eunice clutched the counter behind her and boosted herself up onto it, severing the kiss. She curled herself up into a ball, but Rachel dragged her back by her hips. The sleeve of her dress fell off of her shoulder. "Stop it!"

She kicked out at Rachel, hoping to dissuade her, but Rachel saw the weakness in the attempt and grabbed her again. "Come on, sugar, it's not that bad. Let me show you." Rachel hiked up the skirt of her dress and plunged a hand into her panties. Mary Eunice screamed as she bit back her cry. *Why am I not screaming?* she wondered, dim and distant.

Full lips hooked onto her neck and bit and sucked, leaving a trail of red marks in their wake. The hand between her thighs opened and spread her legs apart. Big tears leaked from her eyes, shuddering free with each blink. She bent her neck and buried her face into the crook of her arm. Fingers parted her lower lips, spread her out and opened her. "Please, stop!" This cry was a sob, but it didn't register to Rachel. A thumb poked at the top of her genitals, jabbing into random bits of soft flesh, until she rolled over a pleasant nub. Mary Eunice squeaked at the sensation and tried to clamp her legs together, but Rachel pinned them apart with her elbow, smirking like she had won the lottery.

"Told you you'd like it." Humiliation rose to Mary Eunice's chest. Another sob shivered through her when Rachel's thumb took the nub and rubbed, aggressive, vicious, painful and arousing at the same time. Mary Eunice bit her own arm to keep from making another sound. "It's okay, babe, just relax—let it feel good—doesn't it feel good?" *No, please.* Mary Eunice caught her fingers into the crook of the grout and dragged farther back under the cabinets, making herself as small as possible.

Her efforts were futile; Rachel simply hauled her back out, no matter how forcefully she dug in her fingernails. "No, stop, please—" Mary Eunice bleated her words like a lost, wounded lamb, having no effect on Rachel, whose smirk didn't fade. A finger jammed inside of her body, and she yelped in pain.

A blur of peach flesh seized Rachel by the arm and jerked her back; as soon as the hands relinquished her, Mary Eunice balled herself up and tucked into the crevice under the cabinets where the two adjacent walls formed a corner, so she saw only another flash of movement before the sound of a fist striking bone cracked through air. Rachel flopped backward, catching herself on the opposite counter, narrowly missing a total collapse. Lana stood square with her back to Mary Eunice, just as naked as Rachel. "She said no."

"Nah, don't be silly, she liked it—who doesn't want their clit rubbed?" *Clit.* Mary Eunice remembered that word, the one she had read in Wendy's journal. Another broken sob, muffled by the palm of her hand, rolled forth. She bit the inside of her cheek, fighting to keep quiet. *That's what it is, what she touched.* Her jaws and lips trembled. Her breaths refused to steady where she sucked in and puffed out. With her knees clamped together and tucked up to her chest, she dared not move.

Lana's fists were white at the knuckles, but her body and voice shook like a feather caught in a breeze. Sweat rolled off of her shoulders in smeared, dribbling beads. "She said no!" she shrieked. Her legs and arms quivered; for a moment, Mary Eunice feared she would fall over. In the silence, Rachel ogled at her, afraid to move. "Get out of my house." Lana's delivered words were cold and collected. Rachel still didn't budge. "Go get your clothes and get out of my house."
Rachel cleared her throat and straightened her posture. "Fine. Let me call a cab."

"No!" Lana's voice rose into a shout, terrified and furious and grieving all the same. "You tried to rape my girlfriend, you can walk your fucking ass back to Timbuktu stark naked for all I care! Get out of my house! Get out!"

Face screwing up, Mary Eunice sniffled hard through her nose. "Lana, please," she whispered, but if Lana heard her, she gave no indication. Rachel turned on the ball of her foot to leave the kitchen, heading back to the bedroom and leaving them in the silent contemplation. "What if something bad happens to her?" Lana growled, deep in her throat, and her arms crossed her chest, each hand plunging into the crook of the opposite elbow; though she hadn't spoken, Mary Eunice understood the message, clear as any words: I don't care. Mary Eunice lowered her face, still frozen to the place where she had crawled to escape from Rachel, unable to convince herself to move. Her jaws refused to still, and she shed more tears.

After a full minute of silence, Rachel marched back up the hall, clothed in her dress once more, purse over her shoulder. She didn't look back. She opened the front door, passed through it, and slammed it in her wake. It rattled in its frame. Lana bent at the shoulders, clutching herself around the middle, seeking some support, and the unbidden urge to soothe her surged through Mary Eunice—but even that didn't convince her to move from where she had latched onto the countertop. An audible sob choked from Lana. Mary Eunice closed her eyes tight, tears flowing freely. Go to her! Make her feel better! Her stomach twisted and threatened to spill out in vomit.

Lana faced her, pink in the cheeks and forehead; deep wrinkles layered her face where she had screwed up against the trauma. Her hands tremored with force where she extended them to Mary Eunice. "I'm suh-sorry." She held out her hands. "Mary, I'm sorry, please—please come here." She wheezed through her next sob, unable to catch her breath. Mary Eunice scooted forward, smoothing down her skirt. Flipping her legs in front of her, she landed lopsided on the tile floor. The tight embrace Lana forked upon her caught her off-guard. "I'm so—so sorry," she whimpered again, her cries inconsolable. Mary Eunice wrapped her in a tight hug in return. Her hands secured around Lana's bare back. She bowed her head, whimpering to herself. They shared their quiet, distressed mewls. Their knees gave out, and Mary Eunice sank down to the floor, tugging Lana into her lap. Lana gasped for air. Her hands quivered, violent. Mary Eunice reached to secure them. "I'm—I—" She choked on the air and put her hands over the flat part of her chest. Mary Eunice touched her hands. "Lana?" she whispered. The anxiety attack had Lana deep in its clutches. What do I do? Helplessness filled her. "I'm here, Lana." She bowed her head, resting her forehead on Lana's shoulder. "I love you." Lana caught one of her hands and squeezed hard enough to hurt. "It's okay." Mary Eunice's voice wept along with the rest of her, quivering and awful and weak. "It's okay." One of her knuckles popped in Lana's grasp. "I love you," she repeated, soft, right to Lana's ear. Lana managed to jerk her head, a nod, some semblance of approval, so Mary Eunice said it again. "I love you." This time, her lips brushed Lana's ear lobe. "I do, more than anyone else." Her tears refused to stop falling. They dribbled onto Lana's shoulder and rolled down her chest. "You're the best part of my life."

Telltale toenails clicked on the tile floor as Gus found them. He gave a wearied sigh before he smeared his tongue across Lana's wet cheeks. Lana shook too hard to give any indication of what she thought; Mary Eunice asked, "Is that okay?" and Lana jerked into another seizing nod. "Okay." She trusted Gus's intuition on how best to help Lana. Massaging Lana's hand in her own, she bumped her nose against Lana's ear. "It's okay. I love you. You're going to be okay. I won't let anything hurt you."

After a few minutes of stroking and murmuring and licking, Lana's breathing slowed back to an elevated but normal rate; her painful grip on Mary Eunice's hand loosened up. She sagged in
exhaustion. "I'm sorry."

Brow quirking, Mary Eunice pursed her lips. "You didn't do anything wrong." She stroked the back of Lana's hand. *I love you so much,* she wanted to say. *I love you more than my own life.* She exhaled against the back of Lana's neck.

"I did—" Lana hiccuped, but she had exhausted the tears from her eyes, bloodshot from drunkenness and weeping. "I promised I would take care of you. I promised you—I promised the Monsignor you would be safe as long as you were with me." She leaned her head back against Mary Eunice's shoulder, screwing her eyes up against the bright overhead light. "I didn't know she was going to—she told me she wanted a glass of water—I wouldn't have let her do that to you, not if I had known."

"I know," Mary Eunice reassured.

Eyes going dull, all soul vanished from Lana's expression, leaving her vacant. "Why didn't you scream?" she asked, but it held none of the interrogative tone, like a statement to which she already knew the answer.

Mary Eunice hesitated a brief moment before she admitted, "I don't know."

Lana's hand flexed around hers, tightening the grasp, while her other arm lay across the top of her stomach. "I didn't, either. Scream." Her eyes fluttered closed. "I knew there was no one there to hear me. I just lay there, underneath him, hoping that if I was really small—and really quiet—maybe he would let me live." She leaned her head on Mary Eunice's shoulder, eyes closed, chin wobbling. "I don't know why I wanted to live so badly. I don't want it anymore, I don't, I wish I would've just let him kill me."

"Don't say that," Mary Eunice chided. "You're here for a reason. God gave you this for a reason, I believe it."

Her face contorted. "Where was God when he was killing my beautiful Wendy?" Mary Eunice flinched at the devastated voice; she had no answer for that question. "Where was he when Bloody Face raped her frozen, dead body?" Her sobs marred her tone almost beyond intelligible recognition. "Or when he took her teeth—or cut her up—when he got rid of her so I didn't even have anything to bury?" Mary Eunice's hands and face turned cold, all of the heat retreating to somewhere safe inside of her where she could conserve it. Lana buried her face in her hands, heaving, but she couldn't manage to keep crying. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean that."

Mary Eunice averted her eyes, staring down at the tile floor. There was a smudge on it where she had missed the last time she mopped. "Yes, you did." Lana stiffened at her honesty. "I know you did. I'm not angry." She swallowed hard. "If I had… If I had seen the things you've seen, I would probably feel the same way. You don't have to believe in God. It doesn't make you a good person or a bad person." She bit her lip as Lana released a shaking sigh of relief. "But… Can I ask you a question?" Lana's big brown eyes rose from her lap to look back at Mary Eunice. "Do you think I'm making it all up? About what happened to me?"

Her eyes fluttered wide. "No! No, of course not—why the fuck would you make up something like that? That's—that's ridiculous—I believe you—what would make you ask that?"

She shrugged, biting her lower lip until she peeled off the next layer of skin and tasted the raw, stinging bits underneath. "Just… Belief in one implies belief in the other, and disbelief works the same way—if you don't believe in God, then you probably don't believe in—in Lucifer, or in his d-demons—"
Lana squinted at her. "I am way too fucking drunk to settle all of your theological nuances right now." Mary Eunice laughed in spite of herself, darkly toned but free, punctuated by her hysteria as she tossed her head back. Once she quieted, Lana sighed, heavy and sorrowful again. "I can't even make love anymore," she whispered, "without thinking of him." A shiver passed through her; the house was chilled, and with Lana's nudity and Mary Eunice's skimpy outfit, they quickly became cold. "She was the first one—the only one, ever, other than Wendy."

Still gnawing on her lip, Mary Eunice found adventurousness prickling in her stomach. "Were you—Were you thinking about me?"

"You heard that?"

"I heard a lot of things I wouldn't have heard in an abbey."

The corners of Lana's lips tilted upward, a rueful smile, sad and regretful and relishing in the small shred of humor she could draw from the situation. "Yeah. I was." She reached down and took Mary Eunice's hand again. "C'mon—I'm so tired—we gotta go to bed." Mary Eunice stood first, hoisting herself up on the counter, and then she offered a hand to Lana, keeping her upright through her drunken sways. Lana fastened onto her, wrapping her in a tight hug, and buried her wet face into her neck. Mary Eunice hugged her back. All of the air flushed out of her lungs, and her chest filled with overwhelming adoration for the other woman, her strength, the heat to her body pouring into Lana's bare skin. Severing hurt more than she wanted to admit, but she kept her hand wrapped in Lana's.

In the bedroom, Lana flopped into bed on the wrong side. Mary Eunice paused in front of the chest of drawers and stripped off her dress; she replaced it with her heavy woolen nightgown before she crawled under the tousled covers beside Lana. The top sheets were wet with sweat. Her tongue rolled up inside her mouth at the squishing sensation. I'll have to wash them tomorrow. She lay on her back, gazing up at the plaster ceiling; in spite of her bodily exhaustion, the prospect of sleeping sickened her to her stomach. A shiver coursed through her body. Everything ached. Her vagina burned where the single finger had penetrated it. Her eyelids fluttered closed, tilting her head back on the pillow.

Lana scooted closer. "Can we cuddle?" Mary Eunice hummed her approval, reaching her arms around Lana's shoulders, and Lana tugged an arm across her abdomen, resting her head on the flat part of her chest. *Always,* Mary Eunice wanted to say. *We can always cuddle.* She was hesitant in drawing her hand over Lana's sweaty, brunette locks, but Lana relaxed with the soft embrace. *I don't deserve to touch her.* The impure feeling twisted inside her stomach, painful and sickening. *But I love her more than I love the whole world.* The amount of sheer affection inside of her, the emotion she held for Lana and Lana alone, was overwhelming. It was too right to be wrong. "I love you, sunshine."

The innocent, sleepy note to Lana's voice shattered Mary Eunice's heart. She could never tell Lana the truth—it would break her trust. Lana had said it herself; she had only ever made love to Wendy. No one could replace Wendy. The love she held for Lana, unique in its deeply romantic appeal, could remain hers and hers alone. "I love you, too, Lana." *More than you know, more than you would want to know.*

A long silence followed, and Mary Eunice suspected Lana had fallen asleep, but then her dark brown eyes flickered up, gazing up at Mary Eunice. "Can I tell you something—because I'm really drunk—and I probably won't ever tell you sober?"

"Lana—" Mary Eunice bit her lip. "If you—If you wouldn't actually want me to know, you—you probably shouldn't tell me." Curiosity probed at her insides, vicious as a hungry dog, but she fought to stifle it, to respect Lana's boundaries—her real boundaries, not the ones bent and broken
by alcohol in her bloodstream.

"Nah, I think I'm going to tell you." Mary Eunice took a long, patient sigh, bracing herself for some proclamation of annoyance or hatred. "I am—" Lana belched, and in spite of herself, Mary Eunice giggled, closing her eyes tight as she rolled up in the bed. "Don't laugh, I'm being serious!" Mary Eunice covered her mouth with her hand to muffle the snickering. Lana chuckled along with her, eyes squinting at the corners, laugh lines and happy wrinkles. "I am totally, and completely, and grossly, and overwhelmingly—god, that's a bunch of adverbs—" Her face twisted. "I'm in love with you."

Mary Eunice's arm around Lana's shoulder squeezed out of reflex at the slurred words. Her heart shuddered in her chest like it decided it could no longer do its job and turned in its resignation. "You're really drunk," she reminded Lana in a soft voice, gentle, probing, because she knew it couldn't be the truth. She's confused because of everything that happened. She'll be better in the morning.

"God—yes, I am so drunk." Lana lifted her head from Mary Eunice's chest and gazed at her, brown eyes glazed and bloodshot. She propped herself up on her elbows. Her breath flushed, warm and wet, across Mary Eunice's face. It tasted sweet as a slice of Wonderbread. "Is it okay if I kiss you?" No, it's not okay, it shouldn't be okay, you're drunk, you're making a mistake. Mary Eunice could have said all of those things, but instead, she nodded, giving Lana the go ahead to brush their lips against each other. Lana leaned forward. Soft and sweet and warm with passion, their mouths collided; it was more than Mary Eunice had given the night she was so ill, more forthright, deeper, and she leaned into it with timid strength, astonished at how good it felt.

Mouth opening, tension rolled through her muscles as Lana's tongue pushed against her lower lip, suckled on her upper lip, thrust into her mouth. She sucked on it in turn. The naturalness of the motion kept her moving, fluid and alive in spite of her internal panic. The emotions curled and mixed inside of her, smothering one another; her terror vanished, drowned out in the ocean of unadulterated love. Lana's hot skin, her nude body, ground against Mary Eunice in all places. Passion flushed through her, all over, head to toe, and blinded her. Her hands slithered up and down Lana's waist.

Their kiss disconnected as Lana moved away from her mouth, slipping to her jawbone, to her neck. "Lana—" The teeth grazed her pulse point, and she bit her tongue to keep from making a sound in response to the pleasant tickling sensation. Lana didn't bite down or suck with much strength; she used the utmost gentleness and care, and her hands roamed Mary Eunice's clothed torso, a thigh sliding between hers and pressing in a series of light bumps, not an incessant grinding. "Lana, I—I—" The hot mouth found the crook where her neck met her shoulder and slid down to her collarbones. Mary Eunice's eyes budded with tears again as she begged, "Lana, stop," in a quivering voice.

The single command made Lana perfectly still. Her hands retreated from the areas they had invaded, the territories which belonged to Mary Eunice and to God. Mary Eunice bowed her head and wept. I don't know what I want! I don't know what's right! I need guidance! She uttered the series of prayers and pleas. They echoed, hollow and empty, inside of her, no different from the rest of her thoughts. Wherever Lana's touch disappeared from her body, despair filled the remaining gaps. "I'm sorry," she choked out. "I'm sorry, I love you, you're drunk, you don't know what you're doing, I can't let you do this—"

Tender knuckles brushed away her tears. She curled up in a ball and rolled toward Lana. The arms wrapped around her. A tender kiss pressed into the top of her hair. "You don't owe me anything." One hand rolled through her locks. "You asked me to stop, and that's good enough. Don't need a reason. Okay? You don't owe anybody a goddamn thing—not a moment of your
time, let alone your body. It's yours, and it doesn't belong to anybody else, and if anybody puts their hands on your body without your permission, it's wrong. Doesn't matter if it's me, or if it's an awful girl from the bar, or if it's some guy on the street—you didn't do nothing to deserve it." In spite of the exhausted slur to her speech, Lana emphasized each word with a punch, the flat of her tongue dry and slapping around inside her mouth. "Do you understand me?"

Mary Eunice bobbed her head in agreement with Lana's words. Lana knew better than anyone—Lana knew so many things, and she was unworthy of her tender touches. Lana didn't love her, not the way she had loved Wendy, and while she didn't feel Lana's friendship was worth any less, she could only pray Lana would forget the proclamation in the morning. Sleepy brown eyes rolled up behind her lids, and a long sigh fluttered from between her wet lips. "I love you, sunshine."

"I love you, too."

An arm draped across her waist and tugged her close. "Get some sleep, sweetheart. I'll keep you safe. I won't ever let anybody touch you again. I'm gonna protect you, if it's the last thing I do."

"Lana..." She lifted her eyes to meet the brown, meek and vulnerable and uncertain; even in her weakened state, impaired and drained by the anxiety attack, Lana had more strength than Mary Eunice would ever know. "I trust you. I love you." Lana pecked her once on the corner of her lips, a quick brushing, before she settled in the embrace. "Goodnight."

Her eyes fluttered closed, but a crooked hum uttered from Lana's mouth, delicate and light. "You are my sunshine," she croaked, "my only sunshine—you make me happy when skies are gray..." The darkness of her subconscious expanded and took her away before she heard the final verse, but inside, it echoed, Please don't take my sunshine away.
Forgive Them

Chapter Notes

Luke 23:34

Mary Eunice awoke to a cold nose pressing against her arm beneath the covers; Gus had managed to wriggle his way beside her and got her attention with his gentle bumping. “Not yet, bubbly,” she slurred, low and mumbled. She tugged the blankets back over them. “I’ll take you outside in a little bit.” Burying her face in the pillows, she exhaled a long sigh, reluctant to so much as glance at the clock, for she didn’t want to know how long the late night had made her sleep. She had fallen asleep with such force, she hadn’t even managed to dream. Gus whined in protest, disliking her commitment to remaining in bed. “Sh, buddy, go back to sleep.”

Beside her, the bed rocked, and she blinked on top of the blankets to watch Lana flee to the bathroom. She lay there, frozen in shock, until the first sounds of retching rose up from the room. Then, slow and careful, she rolled out of bed and tiptoed in pursuit of Lana. How much does she remember? she wondered, afraid to ask, afraid to draw too near. Does she still want me here? I let too much happen. I let her do too much. I was supposed to take care of her. Oh, no. Lana emptied her stomach into the toilet bowl. Mary Eunice wet a washcloth and took it to her face, brushing away the sweat, pinning back her hair with her hands when she began to heave again. As Mary Eunice gathered up the brunette locks and tied them into a ponytail, Lana stilled, pressing her cheek to the cool ceramic bowl. Mary Eunice bit her tongue; she didn’t dare speak, but instead she reached for the bottle of Tylenol and poured a few pills into her hand.

The first words of the morning were, “Thank you,” as Lana accepted the tablets from Mary Eunice. She swallowed them with a bitter swish of water, lips curled downward at the edges. Mary Eunice dabbed another rivulet of sweat from her temple. Lana leaned into her embrace. Her brown eyes drowsed. “I’m gonna wager you’re not ready to narrate everything that happened last night back at me,” Lana mused, heavy eyelashes drooping.

Mary Eunice wet the washcloth again to remove the rest of Lana’s makeup. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin.” She reflected on the night, one long thought streaming into another—Jasmine, Lois, Barb, Katherine, Rachel, each one flashed before her and vanished in a blitz of white powder. The music hummed around her once, the stench of cigarette smoke, the sound of Earl’s gravelly voice, all things on which she was riveted. But she never wanted to go back. The night had ended poorly enough for her to avoid ever returning. “What… What do you remember?” she asked after a brief hesitance.

Lana flushed the toilet bowl and pushed back from it, settling with her back to the bathtub. Mary Eunice crouched and sat beside her. Lana blew a lock of brown hair out from her eyes. “Kinda… Kinda blacked out after we were in the kitchen floor, I think—did I pass out?” Mary Eunice shook her head, but Lana’s eyes didn’t leave her face, narrowing in scrutiny. “I’m sorry—I might be seeing things—” She rubbed her eyes with her fists before she squinted back up to Mary Eunice’s face. Her lips parted in an open-mouthed stare. “Were you making out with someone?” Mary Eunice’s eyes fluttered wide with astonishment at Lana’s abrupt question. “Your, your lipstick, it’s all streaked. And you’ve got a hickey on your neck.” These words sent Mary Eunice lurching in front of the mirror to look at herself. “Was that—Was that Rachel? I didn’t see it last night, but fuck, I was so shit-faced. God, that stupid bitch.” Her brows quirked together in her reflection,
gazing at all of the things Lana had pointed out, the bruising on her neck, the streak of lipstick on her face. She prodded the hickey with one index finger. *That wasn’t Rachel*. She swallowed hard and licked her thumb to try and wipe away the streaked lipstick. *Neither was that.*

“Well?” Lana’s tone held more questions than Mary Eunice would have anticipated, and she realized Lana had read her face, seen the concern and confusion there where everything was out of place, and she knew she couldn’t lie. “Who did that?” Her tone darkened, concerned.

Swallowing a lump in her throat, Mary Eunice fought to look directly into Lana’s eyes; she wound up, instead, staring at her eyebrows. The repercussions of her bare whisper frightened her, but she could not bring herself to lie to Lana. “You did,” she said.

She could have sliced through the following tension in the air with a knife. Lana gaped back at her, like she awaited the punchline of the joke, but Mary Eunice had nothing to provide for her. Her belly hiccuped with nervousness, and she wished she would have lied. It would have been worth the admission in confession—as if she hadn’t already stocked up on sins over the past twenty-four hours. The realization settled over Lana’s face, acknowledging the truth, and she bowed her head, catching it in her hands. Mary Eunice’s gaze fell to the floor, and she turned away, feeling perverted for looking at Lana’s naked body for so long. I slept beside her all night. *I shouldn’t have done that. She wouldn’t have wanted that.* “I’m sorry,” she whispered, hoping it would ease Lana’s anxiety.

The apology earned her an incredulous look from Lana. “ *You’re* sorry? What did you do wrong? I gave you a hickey, if you didn’t notice.” *Oh no. She’s upset.* Mary Eunice shrugged, afraid to do anything else; she couldn’t fathom an answer regardless. Why was she sorry? “God, I—I’m so sorry. I am. You didn’t deserve that. That was so wrong of me. I can’t believe myself.” Lana’s voice thickened and shook. Mary Eunice shuffled beside her again, facing her, and Lana hid her face to shield her crumbling. “I can’t believe I did any of that—bringing home that whore, and you—oh my god.” A shudder passed through her shoulders. “I’m so sorry,” she repeated.

“Lana, I’m not upset.” Mary Eunice offered her arms for a hug, but Lana merely dropped her head onto her shoulder, eyes closed as she heaved through another heavy breath. *She’s starting to panic again.* “Really, I’m not. About any of it.” She would never forget the way Rachel’s hands had stung her body and clawed between her legs; goosebumps erupted across her skin like sesame seeds on a bun. Belly flipping, she wrapped her hand around Lana’s arm and rubbed it up and down. She hoped to provide some comfort. “I love you, and it’s not your fault, none of what happened, I swear.” *Lana, please, you need real help.* Mary Eunice bit her lip. She couldn’t address the matter now, not while Lana fought off another attack. *They’re getting worse, more frequent, I don’t know what to do.* Closing her eyes, she warded off her tears.

A few deep breaths slurped into Lana’s mouth. She squeezed Mary Eunice’s hand in a single tight flex before she relaxed. The anxiety attack passed over her like the angel of death. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why it keeps happening—” Mary Eunice folded an arm over her shoulders, and Lana curled into her embrace, eyes pinched closed. A few tears had escaped. Mary Eunice dashed them away with her thumbs. “Why are you doing this?”

Lips pursing, Mary Eunice said, “I told you. I love you.”

“Even after what I did to you.”

Her cheeks flushed pink. “You didn’t do anything to me. I was confused, but I—I was there, too.” *Shut up shut up stupid,* warred in her mind with, *She has to know, she deserves to know.* “You asked if you could, first, and then you stopped when I asked you to. You didn’t do anything wrong.” *You didn’t do anything I didn’t want you to do. You didn’t do anything I didn’t enthusiastically consent to.* She bit her tongue. She couldn’t allow those things to tumble from her
mouth. But it brought to mind what Lana had said last night. *She was drunk. She doesn’t remember it. Don’t bring it up.* “Really, it—it was fine. I didn’t think anything of it.”

A long, sad sigh drew from Lana’s lungs. “Thank you,” she said after a pause. “I…” She shook her head. “I don’t know what’s gotten into me.” She shoveled a hand through her hair.

Mary Eunice took a bold step. “I think you should do what Lois said.” Lana glanced at her, mingled confusion and skepticism dancing on her face. “I think you should get some medication. I know you don’t want to talk to anyone, but maybe at least you would stop having panic attacks, or they wouldn’t be as strong and frightening, and then your doctor could point you in the right direction.”

Lana’s voice became strained. “Can we not talk about this right now?” Mary Eunice’s heart broke in her chest at the thin note to her voice, frail and fragile, a string clinging to a sheer dress. Her face fell. Could she argue her point? No, she didn’t have the backbone for it. “I know you just want this to get better,” Lana said. “I know, I want it too, but I—I just can’t. I don’t want to be some old fogey hooked on pills, not able to function without them—no counselor would want to see me. There aren’t any other options. I’ve just got to suck it up and deal with it.”

Frowning, Mary Eunice folded her hand into Lana’s. “You won’t be hooked on pills. Do you think that about Barb?” Lana didn’t answer. “People have problems. They get help with them, and it makes things easier. You don’t believe it, but it does. It helps.” The muscles in Lana’s jaws flexed. *You shouldn’t push her,* Mary Eunice advised herself. She bit her lip, hesitating as she considered. *I just want you to be better.* “I could ask Father Joseph if he would see you. He wouldn’t talk about anything you weren’t comfortable with—I could even go with you, if you wanted me to.”

The incredulous look she received in return silenced her words, lips pressing into a line as Lana objected, “You want me to see a priest? Are you cracked?” *Maybe I am.* Mary Eunice drew back her hand, but Lana clutched it, sucking in a deep breath. “No, I—I didn’t mean that. I know you want to help, I’m sorry.” She tucked a greasy lock of brunette hair behind her ear. “C’mon, help me up.” At her gentle nudge, Mary Eunice rose and helped tug Lana to her feet. “Let me get dressed, and we can go do something fun. We’ll—We’ll take Gus to the park.” Her brown eyes glinted in the light of the bathroom. “Okay? I’m fine. The vet said he needs his exercise, and we’ve been loafing owners.” A smile pressed onto her lips, and Mary Eunice could see the tension crinkling there, the prayer Lana uttered for her to accept the face of strength. Mary Eunice nodded. *I love you.* She bit her tongue. Lana embraced her. “Thank you.”

“I’ll take Gus outside,” Mary Eunice said; he peered at them from the bed with a pointed look, waiting for someone to offer him the outdoor bathroom. Lana agreed, and she headed up the hall, whistling for Gus. He bolted after her, skinny tail wagging.

Lana watched her go. Once her silhouette vanished from view, she sank onto the mattress, burying her head in her hands. *God, Wendy, I’m so sorry.* She had managed to fuck up in more ways than she liked to know in a single night. Dragging home a strange whore, fucking her in their bed, making out with Mary Eunice—Mary Eunice, the only friend she had left in the world, the only one who remained when all others vacated the space, and she dared to assault her in the same bed where they slept each night. *Why is she still here?* She couldn’t fathom why Mary Eunice clung to her side after last night. Surely someone else would take her. Surely she would be safer with someone else than with the drunk dyke who couldn’t keep her hands to herself. “God, I’m a mess.”

She brushed her hair out of her face. *It’s getting worse.* Mary Eunice was right; she needed help. But she didn’t know where to start. Seeking help felt like admitting her weakness, her inability to recover independently. She had survived, and yet her continued existence was a struggle. Why
couldn’t she pick up and move on? Fortune had smiled on her; fortune had given her the rest of her life. She was lucky. Everyone told her so—lucky and plucky. I can’t see anyone. I’m fine. I just have to get it under control. Her tenuous control over her own life had become a puppet with rusted joints and broken strings, the puppeteer with broken fingers.

Grumbling under her breath, Lana donned fresh clothes, a skirt with long leggings underneath and a heavy sweater. As she brushed through her hair, the telephone rang, “Dammit.” Much as she hoped it was for the neighbors, she suspected Barb and Lois had decided to check in on her. With the brush still in hand, she headed up the hall to her office and picked up the phone, uttering her greeting.


Lana set her jaw, grinding her teeth, but before she could answer, Lois’s softer voice pressed, “Ask about Mary Eunice—did she have a place to sleep last night? I tried to convince her to come home with us, but she wouldn’t do it. I hate to think she was put out.” Barb shushed her.

With conscious effort, Lana relaxed her tight mouth. “Rachel isn’t here. She left last night. Mary Eunice slept with me like normal—she’s fine.” She’s fine. The lie stung her insides and boiled there. Rachel had hurt her. Again, Mary Eunice suffered the collateral damage of Lana’s choices. She tugged the brush a little harder through her hair, punishing herself.

“But what happened with Rachel? Why did she leave? Did she have work this morning?”

As much as Lana hoped to agree and move on with her life, she knew word traveled faster than wildfire, especially in Pat Joe’s; soon, everyone would know Rachel’s side of the story, however she opted to spin it. Informing her friends, the people who cared, was the least she could do. “No, she, uh… I—I kicked her out.”

Gasps from the other end of the line made her flinch, and she braced herself for the inevitable, but instead of sharp demands and rebukes, Lois asked in her softest voice, “Lana, what happened?”

“She hurt Mary Eunice.” Silence answered her, not allowing her to simply leave it at that; they wanted a real explanation, and she regretted the necessity of offering it to them. Would Mary Eunice want her to say this? She wasn’t certain. Nibbling on her lip, Lana measured a breath through her nose. “I found her—with Mary Eunice pinned to the counter, skirt pushed up, hand down in her panties…” Barb sucked in her breath, sharp and abrupt; not even she could make a crude joke in response to that. “So I threw her out, and we went to bed.” She didn’t remember the last part, but she knew she had awoken in bed with Mary Eunice, naked as a jaybird.

Lois’s quiet sigh held a sad note. “Is she okay? Is she hurt? Poor girl. Oh, I can’t believe we let that happen to her. I’m so sorry.”

Hand to her temple, Lana supported her head with her arm. “I think she’s okay. She says she’s fine.” She said she was fine until she fainted in the shower on Monday. Her word isn’t the best inclination. “We’re going to go to the park and try to—to clear our heads, I guess.” She felt like a bad parent who offered her child a trip to the park or a new toy to apologize for a poor situation.

“Do you want me to come over?” Lois offered. “I’m sure that was an ordeal.” Lana negated the polite question. “Are you okay, Lana? We’re worried about you. Are you sure everything’s alright?”

“I’m fine.” She swallowed hard. She wanted to tell them the truth, but she wasn’t sure she knew it herself, let alone a proper way to communicate it. “Don’t forget Halloween, okay? I’ll see you
both then. And I’ll let you know if we need anything.” The front door closed, and Gus’s toenails
scrabbled on the tile floor as Mary Eunice took him to the kitchen for breakfast.

“Right.” Lois didn’t sound convinced, but she didn’t press Lana for any answers, settling on the
other end of the line. “We’ll be there. Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Her silence hovered, and
Lana reached to drop the phone onto the hook without a farewell, but Lois said, “Lana?” once
more, and she brought the phone back up to her ear. “Mary Eunice told me—” She paused in the
middle of her words. What? Lana wished to demand. What did Mary Eunice tell you? Her heart
flushed in her chest; she had to swallow the throbbing lump. “Last night, she said that…” Lois
hesitated again. “I guess it’s not really any of my business.”

“What? You can’t not tell me. You already caught my interest.” Blue eyes made the hair on the
back of her neck prickle, and she found Mary Eunice’s nervous expression, lips drawn downward, eyes wide
like a frightened horse. Lana’s stomach sank at the look. Whatever Lois intended to tell her, Mary
Eunice didn’t want her to know. The blonde allowed a small smile to wiggle onto her lips, but it
didn’t reach her eyes. Gus bumped his head against her thigh. She turned away from Lana to
entertain him on the couch where he crawled up beside her. I shouldn’t press. Lois doesn’t have to
tell me. Mary Eunice deserves her privacy. Much as she longed for the gossip, she couldn’t violate
what little Mary Eunice had to herself. Softer, she said, “It’s okay—never mind. I don’t need to
know.”

Lois uttered a sigh of relief. “Be careful with her, Lana.” What? “She’s a really good person. She
loves you a lot. Don’t forget that. We won’t miss Halloween, promise.” Lana smiled. “We love
you. Keep warm.”

“Thanks, guys. I’ll talk to you later.” She placed the phone back on the hook and reclined in her
chair, reluctant to rise. What did Lois mean? The curiosity would eat her. But she knew by now
Mary Eunice would tell her anything she needed to know; Mary Eunice wasn’t in the habit of
keeping secrets, by any means. What if it was something important? She couldn’t fathom anything
of the sort. I’ll just ask her. “Sister?”

She left the office to find Mary Eunice white as a sheet, both eyes on her in spite of Gus’s tongue
and whipping tail taking turns on her face. “What did Lois tell you?” she asked in a small voice.

“Nothing,” Lana assured. Now I really want to know. Her journalist’s curiosity raised its head,
threatening to stick her nose where it didn’t belong once again. Even after everything, her ability
to mind her own business was impaired. “You don’t have to tell me,” she said, somewhat reluctant
in her admission. Mary Eunice’s shoulders sank with relief. “You’re allowed to have secrets. Lois
won’t tell anyone. But Barb will tell every queer in the state about it by tomorrow, so if she
knows, that was not a wise decision.”

Her cheeks tinted a little pink as she pushed Gus out of her lap and stood, brushing down her long
skirt, and then she lifted her gaze to Lana, her blue eyes with flecks of green like algae-covered
ponds. “Thank you.”

She extended her hands, and Lana caught them. A thin sheen of sweat covered her palms. We
can’t have that, can we? With an abrupt jerk of her arms, Mary Eunice toppled into her, eyes
stretching into saucers. “Gotcha!” Her fingers jabbed at Mary Eunice’s sides. A shriek of laughter
followed, bright and bubbling as Mary Eunice doubled over at the middle. Lana bent over to
pursue her. Her hands scoured the squishy parts of Mary Eunice’s belly, combing up and down
her back. Soon, Mary Eunice landed on her knees on the carpet. Gus bounced into the floor. His
tongue lolled, and he barked, trying to bust in on the fun with them. Lana bumped Mary Eunice,
and she flopped onto her back, belly up in surrender. “Say mercy!”
Mary Eunice’s arms reached up to defend herself, trying to catch Lana’s hands and swat them away. “Never!” Her face tinted red as the sunset. She managed to fling Lana’s hand off of her sides, but Lana was quick, anticipating her movement as she rolled to the side. Lana pounced on her like a panther. She landed with one hand on Mary Eunice’s tender stomach. With her palm, she kneaded it, eliciting another screech of giggles. “I won’t! I won’t say it!” She writhed and coiled up in the middle. Big tears streamed out of her squinted eyes. They leaked with each shudder wracking through her middle. Lana’s other hand skimmed upward, beneath her blouse, and trailed over the squishy part of her tummy. “Ah!” Mary Eunice’s muscles tensed and relaxed under Lana’s hands before, tossing her head back, she wailed, “Mercy!”

She fell back on the carpet, catching herself on her elbows, and Lana collapsed on top of her with a coy grin. A hot breath fanned from between Mary Eunice’s pink lips. Her big blue eyes met Lana’s, bloodshot from weeping with exertion, a tremble breeching her mouth. The moist, flushed skin puckered up at Lana. Don’t. Don’t do that. Don’t kiss her. She couldn’t stop herself. No amount of logic could have prevented her from grazing her lips against Mary Eunice’s, light and gentle but taboo all the same. Her eyes fluttered closed to embrace the sensation. To her surprise, Mary Eunice pushed into the touch with mild interest until Lana severed. “I’m sorry.” The apology tumbled from her with all of her regrets accompanying. “I didn’t mean—I shouldn’t have—I’m sorry, that was unwarran—”

The last word stilled on her lips when Mary Eunice cupped her cheeks and tugged her down for a second chaste kiss, placing an affectionate peck on her mouth. “I don’t mind,” she insisted. With her index finger, she tucked a lock of Lana’s brunette hair behind her ear. “I know you would never do anything to hurt me. I trust you. With my life, even.” You shouldn’t. The back of Lana’s throat tightened at those words, shocked at Mary Eunice’s announcement. I feel too many things for you. It would break you if you knew. A shiver passed down Lana’s spine at the notion. She remembered the things Mary Eunice had told her Monday night, all the secrets revealed from a tipsy tongue, but she refused to consider them for too long; nothing of that sort could be true, not even feasibly. Mary Eunice was a nun and her friend, gentle and kind and beautiful and all things Lana admired—but Mary Eunice wasn’t a lesbian, and Mary Eunice certainly wasn’t in love with her.

Like she read Lana’s mind, Mary Eunice said, “I love you, Lana.” Lana caught her by the elbows and tugged her upright. Mary Eunice opened her arms for another embrace. I could hug you until Soviets blast our earth into smithereens. The small feeling overcame Lana, the sensation of shrinking in Mary Eunice’s love and her sweet, comforting scent. A kiss planted to the side of her cheek, and a hand combed through her hair, and the affection puddled around Lana; her heart, a dry sponge, eagerly soaked up everything provided to it. Lana could have lingered in the embrace for the rest of her day, the rest of her life. If I ever see the face of God, I think it will look just like Mary Eunice. I think she’s the most beautiful, holy thing to ever grace this earth. “Are you ready to go?”

The question jarred her a bit. The reverie had consumed her. No, I’m not ready. I want you to hold me a few minutes more. A concerned quirk appeared between Mary Eunice’s eyebrows, and Lana eased away all of her stresses with a slight sigh. “Of course.” She turned back to look at Gus where he had lain down, gazing at them but not interrupting. “Are you ready?” she asked him, a broad smile twisting her expression upward. He pounced to his paws, tail wagging. “Are you?” she repeated. He barked once. “One more time?”

Gus dove at them, tackling her with his flapping tongue and tail. Mary Eunice’s bright, chiming laughter eased Lana again. “Ew, god, stinky breath!” Lana fanned his muzzle. “Stinky!” He lapped at her mouth until she rose from the floor, and she offered a hand to help Mary Eunice to her feet. “Let’s go,” she said, “before the parks get super crowded with kids.” She hated to think of an encounter with a group of overprotective parents; the hoard of grandparents in the church
had unsettled her enough.

Bundled in jackets, gloves, and hats, Mary Eunice held Gus’s leash on the way to the park. Lana walked on her right side, hands stuffed deep into her pockets where she clutched Wendy’s Swiss army knife. The crispy leaves skittered across the pavement, sun bright in the sky but bringing no warmth to the frigid city below. A few fluffy, white clouds dotted the sky. The brown grass crunched underfoot when they left the sidewalk and headed up toward the park where a few children played on the equipment.

Lana steered clear of the children and their parents at the picnic grove, making her way to the baseball diamond. “We’ll find a stick and see if he wants to play fetch.” Once she locked the gate behind her, Mary Eunice bent down to free Gus from his leash. At first, he didn’t notice, toddling alongside her with his bright eyes and high tail, excited to have escaped the house in their company. But once Mary Eunice tucked the leash into her pocket, he glanced between them. Finding nothing tethering him to his master, he bolted off to the far corner of the field. “Or maybe he just wants to run for awhile.”

The breeze buffeted over the flat land and chilled them, an icy touch. No trees or walls guarded them from the strong autumn wind. Mary Eunice tiptoed closer beside Lana as Gus’s silhouette charged at a flock of birds and startled them into flight, pointing south. His barks echoed over the landscape. In the sunlight, glistening on his rough, black fur, he lost his age. His bounds gained a spry step. “He looks really happy,” Mary Eunice said. With his tail up, he bounced off of the chain-link fence, missing the tail feathers of the slowest bird by mere inches. “If you hadn’t taken him, they would have killed him by now.” Lana hummed her vague agreement. She’s right. The realization sunk into her skin. “Do you think he knows? That you saved his life?”

Gus paused in his escapades to lie down in the dirt, long pink tongue lolling out of his mouth. He stretched out on his side and rolled in the dust. “I don’t know.” Mary Eunice’s blue eyes wavered from where they focused on Gus across the lot. They landed on her shoes. Her unreadable expression had solemn creases at the corners of her eyes and lips. Lana faced her. “What is it?” she asked, the space between them shrinking.

“I…” She paused to consider a moment. “I think a lot about being with you. How you saved me. I still don’t understand why, after all I did, after all that happened…” She shrugged. “I don’t know why you wanted me to be with you.” She lifted her eyes to meet Lana’s, vulnerable and patient. “I know I’ve asked you before—and you don’t owe me anything, you don’t. But I just don’t—I don’t understand what I did, or what the Monsignor said, to convince you to let me in with you, when I had done nothing to deserve it. I still find myself trying to—trying to make up for what I did, and I’ll do that for the rest of my life, but I just don’t understand, even knowing how good you are, and how much love is in your heart, I—I don’t know why you gave me the chance.” Her voice had gone thin and begun to tremble, but she didn’t cry yet; the two of them had cried far too much over the past night to shed more tears now, especially in public where the voices of children echoed from just over the hill. “I wouldn’t have given me the chance.”

“We’ve already determined that you’re too hard on yourself,” Lana reminded her, gentle in the uttered words as she cast Mary Eunice a sideways look. A flush had come to her cheeks, but whether it rose from embarrassment or the cold breeze slapping her face, Lana couldn’t know. “But…” She struggled to maintain eye contact, and her gaze slatted back across the field where Gus sprang after some leaves caught in the breeze, snatching them into his mouth and reducing them to shreds. “If you want to know the truth, it—it didn’t have anything to do with you.” She twisted the toes of her shoes in the dry dirt of the home base. “I was lonely and afraid. I didn’t want to admit it. Lois offered to stay with me, or to let me stay with them, but I wouldn’t do it. I was too proud. So instead I was tiptoeing around my own house like a robber with a knife in my hand and flinching at every shadow, pretending to be normal again. And then the Monsignor
called me.” She paused, offering another hum while she considered. “I don’t really like that guy, but I’m glad he thought of me. I don’t know—I don’t know what I would have done, if I hadn’t found you.”

Mary Eunice brushed up against her. “I would be lost without you.” Their auras tangled, the tops of their arms touching and separating and touching again with each synchronized breath they took. “Thank you.” Her gloved hand opened, slipped into Lana’s covered fingers. Lana tensed. Blue eyes lifted to her face, a silent question which Lana could read on her face: *Is this alright?*

Lana peered over her shoulder. Miles away, the crowd had no influence on them. They were anonymous figures in the distance. Perhaps someone would see. Perhaps someone would spy them, take their picture, write an article about them to run through the *Boston Globe* without Walter informing her. Perhaps someone would recognize them. But, for the first time in her life, Lana couldn’t say she cared. So what if someone spotted them? She could face anything with Mary Eunice at her side. *Anything I do in my life, I can do because you love me.* Her face warmed with shame. She had spoken those words to Wendy once, a lifetime ago, but now she could have said them again just as honestly and genuinely to Mary Eunice. *It’s more than okay.* She squeezed Mary Eunice’s gloved hand. The friction between the two woolen fabrics created heat. They shared the embrace in the cold October breeze beneath the glowing sun.

Light, Lana leaned over and rested her cheek on Mary Eunice’s shoulder. Mary Eunice giggled. The wind caught her blonde hair. Bright rays of sunlight broke across it like spun strands of gold; the glimmering bits caught Lana’s eye like a crow hoarding shiny trash. The sweet scent of Mary Eunice rose off of her neck and shoulders. Lana relished in it, the perfume unique to her, carried under her hair at the back of her neck. *I love her so much.* Her heart squeezed at the prospect.

How had she let this happen? Why was she not exerting the slightest effort to stop it? Why did she love loving Mary Eunice so much, knowing Mary Eunice would never and could never return her feelings? She didn’t have answers to any of those questions. Her eyes drifted closed in the touch, lingering and not considering all the things which confused her. If she lingered here, in the silence and the chilly breeze with their hands interlocked, she could lose herself to time, and this moment would stretch into eternity, and she could grasp it rather than losing it to the eternal ticking of the clock.

A gasp fluttered from Mary Eunice’s lips, and Lana straightened to gaze across the field. Gus chased a brown streak of fur. “No! Gus, no!” Mary Eunice tore from Lana’s grasp to dash across the baseball diamond. Lana charged after her, only a few paces behind. “Gus!”

The rabbit darted toward the fence and launched itself at one of the gaps in a last-ditch effort to free itself from the pursuing predator. The chains caught it at the hips. It thrashed, trapped. Lana’s eyes widened. “Gus!” Mary Eunice reached the fence before her and batted Gus away from his prey. At her stern look, he backed away, giving her a leery look; Lana seized him by the collar and tugged him back away from where the rabbit lashed out, trying in vain to free itself. Mary Eunice whirled around at the wriggling small mammal. “Mary Eunice—” As Lana meant to caution her, the strangeness of the name on her lips caught her off-guard; she wondered when, exactly, she had stopped thinking of Mary Eunice as *Sister* and started thinking of her as *sunshine.* “Be careful—don’t let it bite you!”

Mary Eunice stooped over, arms extended toward the rabbit. Lana jerked back on Gus’s collar as he lunged, hoping to snatch the trapped, frightened animal from the place it had gotten caught. A few panicked, pained squeaks rose up from the rabbit where she caught it under the forelegs and dragged it back through the hole in the fence.

The large, muscled hind legs churned. Claws flashed and scored across Mary Eunice’s wrists. “Ouch!” She shifted her grip, and it rounded its head and buried its front teeth into the soft heel of
her hand. Lana winced as she tossed the rabbit again, this time catching it by the scruff. Gus lunged and danced on his hind legs. Lana leashed him and dragged him away as Mary Eunice headed back to the gates of the baseball diamond. She held the rabbit out away from her body while it writhed. Past the gate, she dropped the animal, and it galloped out of sight back to the line of the trees beyond the park.

Allowing Gus to pull her after Mary Eunice, she caught the other woman by her elbow. “Let me see.” She took her by the arm, but Mary Eunice tried to retreat. “Let me see,” she repeated. Mary Eunice relented, exposing her scratched forearms and the deep bite wound in her palm. “We should go to the hospital. It might have rabies or something. You probably need shots.”

“It didn’t have rabies,” Mary Eunice said, too fast for Lana’s liking. Her face drained of color. “I—I can just disinfect it at home. It’ll be fine. It’s not that bad.” She winced as Lana probed the edges of the puncture wounds where the rabbit had sunk its teeth into her. “Lana, I’m fine, I don’t need a doctor or anything.” Her words tumbled out a little too quickly, and a sheen of sweat covered her palms as she spoke. “I can take care of it, really.”

“No, you have to go to the hospital. I’m not letting you die of some preventable disease.”

“Please, we don’t even know that rabbits can carry rabies—I’m fine, I’m okay—”

“That’s what you were saying five minutes before you passed out in the shower and burned your whole body with hot water, so forgive me if I don’t take your word for it.”

A pink flush came to Mary Eunice’s cheeks. “Really, please,” she repeated, imploring. “It’s not that bad. I can clean it out at home and it will be just fine. We don’t have to trouble the hospital. I’ll take care of it.”

A frown troubled Lana’s mouth. “Trouble them? Taking care of people is their job. You’re not going to trouble anyone by making sure you don’t die of rabies.” Is that what she thinks? That she troubles everyone? Is that why she’s so desperate to be healthy all the time? “Let’s take Gus home, and we’ll run there and have them look at it.”

Mary Eunice’s whole face tightened into a wince. “But, uh, hear me out—we could not and let it be okay on its own without any doctors involved.” Lana caught her under the arm and tugged her, inclining her eyebrows. I’m not gracing that with a response. At the sight of the car up ahead, Gus bounced on his leash, tail wagging, though his steps were slow from exertion; he had spent himself chasing things across the baseball diamond. “Lana, please,” she implored, and her voice began to tremble, which made Lana’s heart plummet like a cold, hard stone.

They halted in their marching halfway through the park under the copse of trees where a few parents sat. Their eyes moved from their children on the play equipment to the passerby women, but they all stared at the large dog in Lana’s grasp, much to her relief. She wasn’t prepared to deal with any bigots today, not to dodge around them or argue with them sensibly; she much preferred her life as typical as anyone else’s, uninterrupted in its chaos. Lana tugged Gus back on his leash so he sat beside her legs. “What?” she pressed Mary Eunice, face softening. “What’s the matter? Are you afraid of doctors or something?”

“No—Not doctors.” Mary Eunice averted her eyes. Lana reached for her hand, but thinking twice, she withdrew. There are people watching. Don’t be stupid. Her grip on the leash tightened, some reminder to herself so she wouldn’t forfeit the grip and get them into trouble again. “I don’t like needles.”

“I thought you were trained as a nurse.”
“I am—it’s different when you’re giving somebody the shot. Then it doesn’t hurt, and it isn’t scary, and you know definitely what’s in the syringe, and you know how you disinfected the needle, and you know you washed your hands…” Her stressed voice broke off into a hiccup, and she didn’t interrupt the silence, but her blue eyes glistened in the late morning light. Her tongue darted across her nude pink lips. “It’s scary,” she cited, childish, mouth a quivering line and eyes narrow.

Lana gaped at her, somewhat incredulous. *Hurt? You’re concerned with the pain?* She couldn’t believe it, but she couldn’t bring herself to question. “When was the last time you had a shot?” she asked.

Mary Eunice plucked her lower lip between her teeth and chewed. “I—I don’t remember. I know Dr. Arden gave me some antibiotics intravenously a few years ago, but I was unconscious.” *What?* Lana filed away the tale for something to question later, not in the moment, though her curiosity probed and wiggled inside of her, a journalist’s nosiness serving to distract her from the topic at hand. “Before that, it—it was probably when I entered the first grade, when I got my last DTaP booster.” Her eyes wouldn’t meet Lana’s. “I fainted.”

In spite of herself, Lana released a chuckle. “This might surprise you, but a lot of things aren’t as scary when you’re a grown-up as they were when you were six.” Mary Eunice’s face flamed with shame, and she closed her eyes. *She is really afraid.* She cleared her throat. “Alright. No hospital. I’ll call my doctor and see what he says, and if he thinks you’re good to go, then we won’t go anywhere. Does that make you happy?” Mary Eunice bobbed her head, silent and bright red with embarrassment, everything pinched up in her face. “You’re so high maintenance,” Lana teased. A dirty look on her back made the hair on her neck prickle, but she didn’t turn back to look at the offender; her eyes instead fell to Gus, who stiffened and peered past her at whoever had cast the look at her. *Was it a man? A woman? Don’t look. Don’t initiate the confrontation.* Lana had frozen like she heard the rattle on a snake but hadn’t yet found it with her eyes and didn’t know which direction to step away and escape. Mary Eunice’s pinched look dissipated, and she shuffled nearer to Lana, eyes flashing up once and then to Lana. “I think we should go,” she whispered. Her hand reached for Lana’s, but Lana swatted her away, and she didn’t question it aloud, instead keeping her body hovering close to Lana’s in the cool, empty air. A growl budded in Gus’s throat. Both women shushed him before anyone could overhear, and they made a beeline for the car.

Lana didn’t trust herself to look over the crowd until they were safely in the car with the windows and doors locked, Gus swathing at Mary Eunice’s wounded hand with his tongue. “Don’t let him —god, you’re going to get it infected, even if you don’t have rabies.” Mary Eunice gave her a good-natured, chiding look as she scratched Gus behind the ears with her uninjured hand. “Which person was it?” Lana asked, an afterthought, as she appraised the cluster of folks. Only one continued to gaze at the car, a man around their age with narrowed eyes and combed hair; she identified him before Mary Eunice pointed him out to her. Her heart fluttered in her chest. *Don’t be silly. He’s just some guy. He’s no more threatening than anyone else here.* She swallowed the dry lump in her throat. “Let’s go home.” Gus’s tail wagged, slapping her in the face.

She called the office just before their lunch break, and an annoyed secretary answered the phone. “Hi, this is Lana Winters. I’ve got a question about a rabbit bite. Is Dr. Dillon available?” Mary Eunice had gone down the hall to the bathroom to clean up as best she could, while Gus hovered over the water bowl, succeeding in splashing water everywhere. Long strings of drool hung from his jowls as he approached Lana and rested his big, blocky head in her lap. She stopped spinning in her office chair to scratch behind his ears. He lifted his brown eyes to her and allowed a long sigh to puff from his muzzle.

“Yes, ma’am. Please hold for a moment.” She agreed, and the line remained open and silent until
“Miss Winters?”

“Yes, Dr. Dillon?” He hummed an agreement; she could hear him chewing. *That’s gross.* Lana cleared her throat, trying to ignore the obtrusive sound and the boil of hunger in her own belly where they had skipped breakfast in favor of escaping the house and memories of Rachel as soon as possible. “We were at the park earlier, and my dog caught a wild rabbit. My friend tried to turn it loose and got bitten. What should we do?”

“A wild rabbit, you said?” *No, it was an alligator.* Lana agreed with him, wincing as he took a large gulp of his food; he made a long sound of satisfaction which made her belly squelch with distaste. “Well, first, you want to disinfect it. Keep it clean and covered, change the bandages regularly. Put vaseline on it to keep it from scarring, or antibiotic cream if you have some. Anything to keep it from developing an infection.”

With her big toe poking into the shag carpet, Lana spun one way and then another as she listened to the doctor narrating basic first aid care to her; she rolled her eyes, glad he couldn’t see her. Gus pawed at her ankle when she stopped scratching his ears. She lifted her hand and continued her ministrations on his large head. “Yes, but is she at risk of anything more serious? Rabies, or toxoplasmosis?”

*I know how to take care of a small wound, thanks. I don’t need a doctor to kiss all her boo-boos.*

He grunted, a low, manly sound which left Lana massaging her temple with her index and middle fingers, thumb on her jaw. “Rabies cases in rabbits are *extremely* rare, even in the animal independently. There’s never been a recorded case of rabies transmitted from a rabbit to a human.” He cleared his throat, too loud and masculine; Lana tilted the phone away from her ear as he rumbled, her distaste for him growing with each passing second. “Toxoplasmosis is only a threat to those who consume undercooked rabbit meat. Now, if she’s coming in contact with cats, then it might be a concern, but—no, not from a harmless little bunny bite.”

*Harmless little bunny bite? Who do you think you’re talking to? A toddler?* Lana seethed internally, but she didn’t dare hang up on the man. After all, he was her doctor, and if he had anything extra up his sleeve regarding Mary Eunice, she needed to hear it; she didn’t want Mary Eunice to lose a limb simply because she couldn’t bring herself to hear out a patronizing man. “Your biggest concern will probably be an infection of tularemia, or rabbit fever, as most people call it. It’s very uncommon, but it is a possibility. Now, since she’s already been bitten, there’s nothing we can do about it. You’ll just have to keep an eye out for the symptoms. The incubation period is fourteen days, but it will usually start to crop up within five days. Look out for fever, particularly a high fever.”

He cleared his throat, tone becoming more and more rusty, and she heard him give a long exhale. *He’s smoking a goddamn cigarette.* “You’ll also probably notice lethargy and loss of appetite.” Those two things made Lana wince. *Like Mary Eunice would admit to feeling out of the ordinary.* “And she might develop a lesion at the site of the bite, a skin ulcer, and her lymph nodes might begin to swell up near the affected area. Any and all of those are signs of a tularemia infection.”

“So what do we do if she starts showing those symptoms?” Lana pressed. She fought to restrain her annoyance from entering her voice. She had to swallow the venom so it floated back down her throat into her stomach. *I need a new doctor. Surely not all doctors fall on a spectrum of psychotic murderers to pretentious, self-righteous assholes. Surely there must be good doctors out there.*

“Oh, well, that’s incredibly unlikely. Like I said, the odds of the rabbit being infected are so very slim, truly. There are fewer than two hundred cases of tularemia in the US every year. But, supposing she did develop some symptoms, and you suspected an infection, then just bring her
here, or to the ER, or to her general practitioner, and they’ll confirm the infection and prescribe some antibiotics. Tularemia isn’t a death sentence, even when it does occur, so you’re probably in the clear. Don’t worry yourself, and don’t worry her.” He coughed once, and she heard the distinct sound of a cigarette lighter striking. “Miss Winters, really, as your doctor, I find it is in your best interest to schedule another check-up for you, since you missed your last one.”

She set her jaw. *Not this shit again.* “I’m not interested. Thank you, Dr. Dillon. I’ll call you if I need anything.” She slammed the phone back into the cradle before he could answer her. Heaving a frustrated sigh, she hurled herself from her chair and slammed it back into the desk. “Sister?” she called. Gus trailed after her, uttering a long breath through his nose; the day’s activities had left him pooped, and as she joined Mary Eunice in the bathroom, he jumped onto their bed and sprawled out on top of the covers.

Hydrogen peroxide fizzed where Mary Eunice had poured it over the puncture wounds. “I’ve got the doctor’s news,” Lana said, and Mary Eunice turned to face her with those bright eyes. Lana’s heart squeezed inside of her, honey and blood pouring out of it. *Oh god.* Someone had punched her in the gut with this affection, the overflowing, maddening love she held for Mary Eunice. *I’m lucky I didn’t say anything to her last night. Or maybe I did. Did I? Would she tell me if I had?* Her stomach hiccuped at the prospect. No, she couldn’t have said anything. It would’ve frightened Mary Eunice if she had. A concerned wrinkle appeared between Mary Eunice’s eyes, and Lana mirrored her expression, mouth forming a straight, pensive line. “You…” She shook her head, pretending to be shaken by tragedy. “You’re going to die.”

“What?” Mary Eunice’s eyes flared wide; the bottle of hydrogen peroxide slipped out of her hand and crashed to the floor, bouncing off of the tile, but she didn’t break eye contact with Lana. Her pink lips formed a gape. They buffered against one another, seeking words lost somewhere in the sand of her confusion. “What do—What do you mean?”

In spite of herself, a smirk spread across her face. “Surely you know you’re going to die one day, don’t you?” Mary Eunice’s white face regained its color as Lana delivered the punchline of the joke, still astonished into silence but gradually recovering. “The doctor said you’re going to be fine. Rabbit bites aren’t very bad. We just have to keep an eye out for infection.” A shaky laugh trembled through Mary Eunice’s frame, her hands shaking; a white fizz still burbled out of the deep puncture wounds. “Here.” Lana took her hand and the gauze, wrapping it tightly around the injured spot. “I’m sorry, that was a mean joke.”

She glanced back up to Mary Eunice, spying the moisture on her pink lips, and she smiled as she gazed at them. Mary Eunice withdrew her hand from Lana’s grasp. Her eyes darted up to Lana’s. A certain hesitance lay in those depths, a yearning not acted upon; Lana wanted to ask her what provoked such longing within her, but she couldn’t bring herself to invade the privacy. “What do you want for lunch?”

The abrupt change of subject caught Lana off-guard, but she didn’t think anything of it.

Their day passed in peace; Lana spent the afternoon writing, settling down and accomplishing something, while Mary Eunice finally had the opportunity to catch up on all of her chores like she’d wanted to do days ago. The vacuum cleaner sang her a lullaby to the beat of the clothes dryer, the washing machine syncopating. Each song began and ended with a fizzing sound of dust spray on the wooden furniture. She even took all of the pictures down from the walls and dusted them. She spent a special amount of time on all of the ones containing Wendy, lingering there to make her shine. *I hope I’m doing alright, Mary Eunice thought as she gazed at the portrait. I hope you’re proud of Lana. I hope you’re giving her strength. I wish you were here instead of me.* She recalled Lois’s words from the following night. Wendy’s loss had stung all of them in so many ways. Mary Eunice couldn’t have replaced her if she was like them—a working class, closeted
lesbian sneaking off to Pat Joe’s in the middle of the night to seek company of one like herself. She certainly couldn’t compare to Wendy, not for Lana, not for Barb, not for Lois. I would do anything to take your place so Lana could have you again.

In the late evening, when they had both eaten dinner and showered, they lay in bed, Mary Eunice knitting and Lana flipping through a book without glancing at the pages. Her hands continued to form the stitches. She was almost done with her hat. She liked it so much, she thought she would save it to give Lana for Christmas, along with the scarf she’d finished, the first half sewn by Wendy. I don’t have anything else to give her.

Mary Eunice didn’t like to consider it, having nothing to gift Lana for Christmas when she hadn’t had anyone in her life deserving of a gift in years. Her first year at Briarcliff, she had scrounged her pennies, things she found on the floor and in the pockets of patients’ dirty laundry, and she’d asked to accompany the Monsignor to the city for one of his trips so she could buy Sister Jude a new Bible to replace her old copy, which while well-cherished, was falling apart at the seams. The Monsignor had blessed it for her, and they’d both signed their names inside the front cover: “To Sr. Jude, from Sr. Mary Eunice and Mgr. Timothy with love and devotion.” Sister Jude, though, hadn’t received the gift gratefully; she berated Mary Eunice for greedily hoarding money for her own devices and asking for a trip to the city under false pretenses. Mary Eunice hadn’t tried to appreciate anyone else for Christmas since then, even when Dr. Arden decorated her with tiny trinkets.

Her needles glided over one another, occasionally one tinkling against the other. Lana slammed the book closed and tossed it onto the nightstand. “I can’t read that. I can’t focus.” Mary Eunice faced her, but her hands didn’t cease their repetitive motions, one combing over the other; Lana’s annoyed face vanished. “How are you doing that? Without looking?”

“Oh—the knitting?”

“No, clearly, you’re writing in Mandarin. Yes, the knitting!”

Mary Eunice chuckled, eyes flicking away from Lana’s back to the forming hat in her hands. “It’s just habit. A lot of practice. I spent a lot of time doing this when I was young.” She bit her lip, watching as the threads combed over one another. “It’s a good way to pass time. Makes me feel like I’m accomplishing something. Father Joseph was right—it helps a lot, having a hobby.” Yet again, Father Joseph was right. I wish Lana would see someone. Mary Eunice knew better than to bring it up now. “I used to save all of my extra money so I could buy yarn in September, when it started getting chilly, and I would work on scarves and hats in any free time I got so I could wrap everyone up and keep them warm. They didn’t get new clothes very often.” She reflected on the conditions, the threadbare, patchy, holey clothing she had covered under the sweaters when she rarely had enough time to complete one. “I guess that was what made me lucky, being the oldest—if anybody got new stuff, it was usually me. Everyone else got my hand-me-downs and hoped they would fit.”

Lana chuckled. “Yeah, I remember that. Tim and Roger were always grumpy about inheriting my pants. They wouldn’t stay up. Everybody in school made fun of them, the Winters’ twins who wore their sister’s pants.” Mary Eunice laughed, eyes widening. She covered her mouth with her hand as Lana narrated. “And whenever they complained, Daddy told ‘em they were just lucky they didn’t have to share Frieda’s skirts, too. Of course, they were total wrecking balls. They destroyed anything they got their hands on, clothing included. Nobody in their right mind shared with those two.”

Unable to muffle her laughter, Mary Eunice found the story leading to one of her own, something she had forgotten until now. “When I was eleven, I grew seven inches in a year, and I nearly made us all homeless. It didn’t matter what I did. All of my shirts became crop-tops no matter how
much I tried to keep them tucked in. I kept getting in trouble at school for my shirts riding up, and my skirts not being long enough.” Her hands stilled in the knitting, unable to focus on it as she spoke. Lana looked at her, interest reflecting in her brown eyes. “One night, I was making dinner, and all we had was some rice—it was the third or fourth time we’d had rice that week. Carol asked me, she said, ‘Why can’t we have some real food?’ but before I could answer her, Molly peeked up from her school book, and she said in this bright, matter-of-fact voice, ‘We’re poor because Mary Eunice is really tall!’”

Choking on her own saliva, Lana heaved into a broken laugh, like she didn’t want to laugh at it but couldn’t help herself. “That’s—that’s not even funny, that’s just really sad—really, really sad.” Nonetheless, she didn’t stop shaking with laughter. Shaking her head, she said, “We survived the Depression, but we always had something to eat. Sometimes it was just chipped beef on bread, but it was always something. I don’t remember it that well.”

She fell into a reflective silence, and Mary Eunice put the knitting aside. She had hoped to finish the hat tonight, but she much preferred talking to Lana. Propping herself up on her side, she supported her head in her hand. It ached where the rabbit had bitten her. She ignored the twinge. “When I was six, in 1937, and Frieda was four, and the twins were three—it was Christmas, and we hadn’t had a real big meal in weeks. We went to the church potluck, for the whole community, so everyone could feel like they ate a real Christmas meal.”

Lana rolled over to kill the bedside light. The moonlight streamed through the window, illuminating her beautiful face in a silver light. Oh, dear. Mary Eunice’s heart skipped in her chest at the sight. Her heart squeezed and overflowed. I’m in love with her. No matter how many times she thought she had realized it, it never failed to punch her in the stomach again, strike her down, send her plummeting into an open-armed free-fall. The glow of Lana’s eyes drew her nearer, propped up on her arm. The scent of Lana’s lotion and shampoo wafted across her nose.

But, not noticing her shifting, Lana continued, “I always sat with the church boys. Mama asked me to watch Frieda and the twins, but—well, I wasn’t like you. I wasn’t a good, responsible oldest sibling. I preferred to pretend I wasn’t related to them.” Mary Eunice chuckled, crinkles forming at the corners of her eyes. She’d spent her childhood earning her place into the family, trying her best to deserve the love and mercy she’d received under Aunt Celest’s wing. “When I got up to get a dessert, I walked past my parents’ table, and I heard my mom saying, ‘I just can’t wait til she sees it!’ and I knew they were talking about me and the new baseball I wanted.”

“They weren’t?” Mary Eunice guessed.

Lana laughed, leaning her head back in the pillows. “They weren’t! They’d saved up all of their money to get Frieda this gorgeous bright red dress. The boys and I didn’t get jack shit. They told us we should be happy for her because she was our sister. I was so jealous. My baseball wouldn’t have cost half of what that dress put them out.”

“Sounds like someone’s a little bitter,” Mary Eunice teased. Lana glanced sideways at her, eyes leering, and she pressed, “It sounds like it.”

A snicker quivered through Lana’s chest and vibrated the bed. “I’m so bitter. Sometimes, I still find myself thinking—dammit, they bought Frieda that damn dress!” Both of them burst into bright laughter. Mary Eunice fought to stifle her own so she could hear Lana’s, the music of the sound, not crafted often enough. But her expression lost its smile. Lana hummed to herself, sadder and darker. “I’m sorry about Rachel.” Oh, no, Lana… Mary Eunice extended a hand to her, grabbed her on top of the covers, and Lana wrapped her hand in her own and cradled it. In the faint moonlight, Mary Eunice watched her lips move and twitch against one another, forming the words she heard but didn’t heed. “What she did to you. That wasn’t right. I was drunk, and stupid, and lonely—I shouldn’t be lonely, because I have you, and you’re the best thing I’ve gotten in a
The silence astonished her, but Lana’s muffled grunt woke her from her reverie; she realized how their lips had connected, how she had lunged, her body positioned over Lana’s and warm with attraction. She severed with an astonished gasp. “Lana, I…” Her tongue stilled in her mouth. Her lips flicked against one another, but Lana pressed an index finger there to quiet her.

“Sh,” Lana whispered. “It’s okay.” She looped an arm over the back of Mary Eunice’s neck, tugging her closer. “Some people would say interrupting is rude.” Her light voice teased Mary Eunice’s throat, tickled like a feather there. “I prefer if you ask, though. Give me a little warning. Okay?” Yes, yes, yes. Mary Eunice agreed with a vigorous nod. “I’m glad you’re comfortable with me—being your friend.”

The last word sank deep inside of her. How many ways would they use that word? How far would their friendship stretch? No farther than this. This is far enough. Mary Eunice took a lock of Lana’s hair and spun it around her finger. Of course they were just friends. Many women kissed their friends; she’d seen them do it in the movies on the television, kisses offered as greetings and farewells, quick pecks on the lips as addresses and exchanges of affection with nothing implied between them. No one had ever normalized such interactions for her before, and she suspected the same for Lana—no one daring to draw near enough to her and bond. It was new territory for both of them, but that didn’t mean they weren’t platonic.

Because she could think of nothing else to say, Mary Eunice said, “Sweet dreams.” She rolled onto her back and opened her arms; Lana slept better on her stomach. Lana slid nearer to her, resting her cheek on the sharp curve of Mary Eunice’s collarbone.

“How do you call me that? How am I the sunlight when you are the sun?” Mary Eunice smoothed a hand down the flat of Lana’s back, both eyes up on the ceiling, where the dancing shadows couldn’t disturb her with the curtain of holiness shrouding her from them.
Let Love Be Genuine

Chapter Notes

Romans 12:9

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Halloween afternoon, the doorbell echoed throughout the house. Lana lifted her head from where she’d stooped over her typewriter, eyes narrow through her glasses to read the text generated by her fingers; she was knee-deep in the fifth chapter of her book, and she had hoped to finish it before Lois and Barb arrived. She glanced up at the wall clock. Her brow furrowed. “Who the hell?” She spun away from her desk to watch as Mary Eunice left the kitchen, sweater sleeves pushed all the way up to her elbows. “Wait, don’t—” Lana sprang up from the desk and raced toward her. “We don’t know who it is!”

Mary Eunice looked through the peephole on the door. “Yes, we do.” She unlocked the deadbolt in spite of Lana’s hasty hiss of disapproval and opened it to Lois. “Hi!” Mary Eunice beamed at the redhead, but her smile dissipated as Lois hurried into the house, her auburn hair tied back into a neat bun.

Lois glanced up at them, harried eyes springing from one to the other. “I’m so sorry I’m late.”

Lana frowned. “Late? It’s not even two o’clock. Trick-or-treating starts at six.”

“I know, only four hours! I have to do a total transformation! Marilyn has to be perfect.” Oh, dear. Lana lifted her gaze to Mary Eunice, exchanging a look with her; Mary Eunice shrugged it off, apparently unbothered by the notion, though her teeth troubled her lower lip, and her right hand reached to pick at the healing scabs on her left arm. “Lana—what’s your costume? What are the makeup demands for it? Barb gets off work at four; she might have to do it for you, unless you can do it yourself, but I would recommend against that. You don’t want powder on your costume.”

She ogled at Lois for a moment, lips parted and words refusing to come to the surface, tongue flapping uselessly at the roof of her mouth, before she managed to say, “No—There’s no makeup with my costume.” I know what I’m going to wear. She wanted it to be a surprise. “Just take care of… Marilyn.” She raised her eyebrows at the words, fighting to keep a straight face. Should have known better than to trust her with this. “The bathroom is yours. But, please—keep it tame, alright? No full-body makeup, or cutting large portions of her hair, or doing anything her priest might raise an eyebrow at.” Lois rolled her eyes skyward, and Mary Eunice’s face became all the more sheepish, red tinting her cheeks as she averted her blue eyes, hand still picking at her arm until Lois noticed and swatted it away. “I’m serious. Reporters might show up, and they know her name now.” That was a mistake. Lana bit her lip; it was too late to consider the repercussions of her writing now. Mary Eunice had given her consent, and Lana couldn’t ask for much more than that. She couldn’t request for the journalists to leave them alone because she knew they wouldn’t.

“Just, please, be mindful?”

“Wouldn’t dream of doing anything differently,” Lois promised, but her tone indicated otherwise, punctuated and sarcastic; Lois looked to Mary Eunice and winked like two conspiratory teenagers.
fighting to avoid their mother’s gaze. Mary Eunice shrugged, sheepish, at Lana. The wrinkle between her brows hadn’t vanished. “Lana, seriously, relax. It’s Halloween. It’s all about being someone you’re not and having some fun!” A simper flushed across Lois’s petite lips, a glow in her light brown eyes, the flirtatious appeal which had won Barb’s heart. “I think even priests know that. Or, they should, anyway. They’re people, not emotionless robot-drones with Bibles stuck in their heads. C’mon, babe.” She took Mary Eunice by the elbow and tugged at her. “I’ve got a whole slew of things for you to try. All made for sensitive skin. I don’t want you to get a rash again…”

Gazing at them as they retreated down the hall into the bedroom, Lana tilted her head back in appraisal, the way Lois held Mary Eunice’s bicep, the light sound of Mary Eunice’s fluttering giggles just before the door closed in their wake; if they had been anyone else, two strangers to her, Lana would have suspected they retreated to the bedroom to make love, not to play dress-up. A hot green fire licked up through her gut, bitter envy.

Don’t be stupid. You can’t be jealous. Lois is her friend, just like you are. Face smarting red, she considered, But Lois probably doesn’t kiss her at random. Sweat slicked her palms; she turned on the ball of her feet and headed toward the kitchen for a snack. She needed a distraction. Lois doesn’t hold her at night. Doesn’t sleep under the covers with her. Doesn’t know what her voice sounds like when she sings.

She popped two slices of bread into the toaster, seeking some reprieve from her mind, which had managed to transform friendship into a competition. It’s not a contest, Lana. Chill. Drumming her fingertips on the countertop, she stared down into the toaster. She was glad Lois and Barb had accepted Mary Eunice; she was glad Mary Eunice had accepted them in turn. The hands of fate had worked this relationship into something beautiful. What were the odds of all the nuns in the world, Lana befriended the one who wouldn’t hate her for who she loved? How many nuns would have allowed her to kiss them without lashing out? How many would have treated her as well as Mary Eunice had treated her? She is too perfect. She is more than I deserve.

Tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, Lana studied her reflection in the side of the metallic toaster. Her face had filled out since emerging from Briarcliff; she didn’t look so thin, so dirty, and the smattering of gray hairs (which she swore were stress-induced, not a result of genuine aging) hadn’t expanded since she first noticed them. Her skinny arms had grown plumper, regaining their dimples. With Mary Eunice’s cooking, she didn’t look like someone who had crawled from the very depths of hell anymore, besides the scars smattering her body, which she knew would likely never fade. The bump at the base of her throat, the lip of raised flesh on her ankle, the slight dents of teeth marks on her right breast—those things would remain, as much as she loathed to admit, for years, if not forever. The line of a surgical scar on her abdomen marked where she had killed the child in her womb. The slash on her right forearm showed where she had protected Mary Eunice from Celest. I owe Mary Eunice for both of them. She chewed on the inside of her cheek. I don’t regret either of them.

The toast popped out of the toaster oven, and she lifted her eyes from her reflection to take out the slices. Slathering on liberal amounts of butter on each piece, she ate them standing there in the kitchen, staring at the wall, and thinking about Mary Eunice in the next room over. What are we doing? She loved Mary Eunice—that much was undeniable. Don’t be silly. She doesn’t feel that way about you. She can’t. She’s just touch-starved, and she trusts you to guide her. You’ve done a shitty job of it. The poor girl has never had a friend before, and you’ve taught her all backward. She thinks she owes you shit. Each dry crackle of bread against her tongue grounded her in the moment. Her heart clenched. What would Wendy think of her now, tangled in an unrequited romance with another woman so soon after her death?

She didn’t know. What would I think of her? Lana stopped chewing. The bread moistened in her mouth and dissolved into a mushy, greasy puddle of salted butter. If their roles were reversed, and she had died and Wendy had lived, what would she think of Wendy doing this? Of loving
someone else so soon? I would want her to be happy. But her jaw set nonetheless. She couldn’t lie to herself enough to think she wouldn’t be a little jealous, a little miffed, if Wendy replaced her so soon. They’d gone through so much together; they’d seen worlds and left worlds hand-in-hand, spent the darkest times tangled in one another behind locked doors, hands in each other’s hair. Her appetite vanished. She had to gulp around the painful lump of mushy bread in her mouth. I can’t replace her. I’ll never replace her. Mary Eunice is different. If Wendy were here instead of Lana, she would carry the same pain Lana knew now in her chest, the agony which followed her whenever she opened the closet and spotted a familiar sweater, whenever she caught a whiff of marijuana smoke, whenever she awoke and for a split second believed the silhouette beside her belonged to someone else. I would never want Wendy to feel this way. I would want her to do anything to make herself feel better. I couldn’t be jealous. Not knowing what it feels like without her.

Munching through the second piece of toast, her stomach settled in spite of the heavy melancholy landing over her shoulders. She tied her hair back into a ponytail. I need to finish writing before Barb gets here. With that, she left the kitchen and retreated back into her office, where she hadn’t yet freed the paper from the clutches of the typewriter. Fingers back to the keys, she let the memories roll from her fingertips, freed from the darkest crevices of her mind onto the page.

…

A lovely ivory-toned dress sprawled over the bed where Lois had dropped it, pleated and gorgeous in every sense of the word; Mary Eunice could picture almost any beautiful woman wearing it. “You’re going to look absolutely wonderful in it,” Lois assured her. Me? Mary Eunice questioned internally. “It’s from The Seven Year Itch. Have you seen it?” Mary Eunice shook her head, perplexed by the title. Lois dragged her to the bathroom and undid the buckle of her skirt as she explained, “It’s a romantic comedy movie. It has this famous scene where Marilyn stands over a grate in a subway, and a draft blows up from it and blows up her skirt. Of course, I’m not going to do that to you—I don’t have the means or time to set up something like that—but people will recognize it. And they’ll recognize you, once I’m done with you.”

Mary Eunice’s skirt fell to the floor, and she stepped out of it, cheeks tinted pink at the exposure. Her fuzzy thighs rubbed against one another and pinched in some subconscious attempt to hide herself from Lois’s eyes. Lois, however, didn’t scan her with lust, didn’t scrutinize her; she was fully absorbed in her craft. “Have you ever had your legs shaved before?” Mary Eunice shook her head, perplexed by the title. Lois dragged her to the bathroom and undid the buckle of her skirt as she explained, “It’s a romantic comedy movie. It has this famous scene where Marilyn stands over a grate in a subway, and a draft blows up from it and blows up her skirt. Of course, I’m not going to do that to you—I don’t have the means or time to set up something like that—but people will recognize it. And they’ll recognize you, once I’m done with you.”

Lois took Mary Eunice by her ankle and massaged the white cream into her skin. Thick vanilla scent wafted up to her nose, accompanied by the clean, pressed odor of Lois’s perfume, different from Lana’s more floral scent. With rapt attention, Mary Eunice’s gaze followed Lois’s fingers pressing into her bare skin and muscle, the rippled movements there. That feels nice. She didn’t say it, but her blush darkened as Lois wandered higher up her leg, halting around her mid-thigh. “This will keep you from having as much stubble and itching,” Lois said, flashing a bold, bright smile with her straight, white teeth. She’s beautiful. An auburn lock sprang out of her bun. Mary Eunice’s hand darted out, caught it, and tucked it behind Lois’s ear. The brown eyes lifted to hers, away from where she’d begun to lotion Mary Eunice’s other leg. “You’re quiet today.”

“I…” Mary Eunice licked her lips, and a nervous chuckle came to them from somewhere high in her throat. “I’m a little out of my element.” She was safest with God; she knew well enough by now. Security came when she wrapped herself in a habit, covered her hair with her veil, cradled
her rosary in her hands, and knelt in fervent prayer. Femininity had never come to her, not even in her youth; Aunt Celest had never afforded the time to teach her the important things about a woman’s beauty. “I only tried to shave my legs once, when I was thirteen or so,” she admitted, wringing her hands in her lap. “I cut myself pretty badly. My aunt was furious.”

“I thought this scar looked like a razor cut.” Lois traced the pale line, a straight slash over her left shin bone, with one fingertip. The light glinted on her long fingernails covered in a clear polish. “Don’t worry. I don’t use straight razors. I use safety ones with guard blades. They don’t cut as close, but they’re a lot safer. Worth the trade, in my opinion.” She took out the small, handled razor and placed it on the ground beside a can of shaving cream. Dipping her fingers into the bowl of water, she rubbed it over Mary Eunice’s lotioned legs, making the skin slick. “Why was she angry with you, though? Every girl does something silly like that when they’re young. I tried to pierce my ears with my mama’s sewing kit and nearly lost my cartilage for the infection. Surely she knew that.”

Gulping, Mary Eunice shrugged, gaze falling to the ground. “My cousin called her at work and told her I was bleeding to death. I think that made her mad, more than anything else. She never came home early from work unless there was a real emergency. She couldn’t believe I’d done something so stupid.”

Lois shook the can of shaving cream and took a lump of it into her hand, smearing the white cream all the way to her mid-thigh and back down to her ankle. “I bet you remembered those stitches, though!” she chimed, bright as she spoke. Once she had spread it over the expanse of the leg, she took the small razor into her hand. “This might pull a little, since the hair is really long. I’m going to have to go over it a few times.”

Nodding in agreement, Mary Eunice watched as the blade glided over her leg for the first time. It didn’t even prickle on her skin. She’s really good at that. “I didn’t get stitches,” she said, an afterthought. “Aunt Celest didn’t have the money for the emergency room bills, or for a doctor’s visit. But she helped me patch it up—it wasn’t that bad.” Mary Eunice nibbled her lower lip. Lois fanned the blade off in the bowl of water and went to swipe again, a methodical rhythm which comforted Mary Eunice’s soul. Lois brought the blade down, with the grain of the hair, first, and then she doubled back and brought it back up against the grain. “Why do you like dressing up and stuff so much?” she asked. Reconsidering, she scrambled to add, “I mean—not that I disapprove, I just wondered why, if there is one.” She chewed the inside of her cheek and reached to pick at her arm, anxious at her blunt, confrontational question.

Lois batted her hand away from where she’d begun to pick. Her gentle touch left a white smear of shaving cream on Mary Eunice’s hand. “I’ve always loved makeup and fashion, ever since I was a young girl. It was important to my mother, so it was important to me.” Another lock of her hair fell out of the bun, and she kept combing the razor over Mary Eunice’s leg, shaking the blade off, and applying it again. “I decided I wanted to go to school for cosmetology. I never finished, but I met Barb at college, and… Well, I guess you know how that ended.” Her broad smile had abated into something small, wistful, and satisfied. “I didn’t get certified, but I learned enough to take up at the cheap barbershop downtown, and with Barb, I started to meet my queens. I guess they’re my real calling, taking care of them.”

Brow fuddling, Mary Eunice held still as possible, not wanting to mess things up, though Lois kept brushing the underside of her foot, and she had to bite down her squealed giggles and urge to thrash in response to the tickling. “Jasmine—is she a queen?” she asked, tentative and hesitant in her exploration of the community. “She seems, um, she seems different from the others I saw. The men in dresses, I mean.” She gripped the edge of the toilet lid, murmuring, “Sorry,” when she realized how silly and ignorant she sounded.
“Don’t be sorry. It’s better to ask! We were all strangers once, you know.” Lois squeezed the back of her calf as she worked the razor over her shin. “Jasmine isn’t a queen like the others. The others are gay men who own the feminine side of their identities and dress as women—they’re called drag queens, when they’re like that. A lot of them take other names and prefer women’s pronouns when they’re in drag, but they take off those masks at the end of the day and go home and feel satisfied with who they are. Does that make sense?”

“How is Jasmine different? Is it because she prefers women?”

Lois shook her head. The lock of hair trembled in the air with her movement. “No. Jasmine isn’t a drag queen at all. Jasmine is a woman. I think the doctors call it transsexual, now, but there are different words for it.” Mary Eunice’s confusion didn’t fade, lips pursed and eyebrows drawn together while she struggled to puzzle through Lois’s words. “She has a different body than the rest of us. She feels like a woman stuck in a man’s skin, if that makes any sense.” It doesn’t. Mary Eunice had to pause and give long thought to the notion. A woman in a man skin? The concept was totally alien to her. “So Jasmine isn’t like the queens. She doesn’t go home at night and feel perfectly happy when she takes off her dress. She has to sneak around her wife’s back and deal with everyone constantly calling her the wrong name.”

“But everyone knows about her, don’t they? At Pat Joe’s?” Lana had told Mary Eunice immediately upon entering the bar not to misgender Jasmine, and she assumed the knowledge was likewise disseminated through and respected by the community.

“At Pat Joe’s, yes. But Jasmine’s wife doesn’t know she works there. She works at a factory during the day. And even the people in the bar don’t always respect her. They want to debate her place in the community, since they think she’s just a man who likes women, and there isn’t anything gay about that.” Lois navigated the bumps of Mary Eunice’s knobby, scarred knees with the head of razor, the utmost care and caution portrayed on her parted lips and squinted eyes. She brought it over the cap of the knee and then brushed her fingertips over in its wake, testing to see how much stubble she’d left in her wake.

Mary Eunice asked, “But wouldn’t it just be easier if she pretended to be a man, like everyone expects?” After she asked the question, a shiver of anxiety passed down her arms into her hands. “Not that—I mean, not that someone should do something just because that’s what people expect, but… It seems like life would be a lot easier for her.”

Light brown eyes flashed up to hers. “Perhaps it would be, on the surface,” she answered. She batted the pale peach fuzz off of the razor into the water. “But how would you feel if you woke up every morning, and you knew you were Mary Eunice, and everyone else looked at you and saw John, and called you John, and treated you like John, and when you looked in the mirror, you saw John? You’d be very confused, wouldn’t you? And scared? And eventually, you’d want to tell someone, or you’d go crazy.”

*That makes sense.* Mary Eunice gave a slow, long nod. “Yeah,” she echoed. “I would lose my mind.” She imagined her body as a man’s body, no breasts, hair cropped short, genitals forming something foreign she hadn’t experienced in her full consciousness. It made a cold shiver pulse down her spine. For all of the times she had cursed her body as a child, wishing it held more beauty or more tenderness, she couldn’t imagine it any other way. *This is the body Lana holds at night.* As long as Lana cherished this skin, these muscles and bones which she called her own, she would change absolutely nothing about herself. God had made her this way for a reason; He had crafted every facet of her skin, planted every freckle, and made her a masterpiece. She was a work of art, just the way she’d emerged from her mother’s womb, even as she despised bits of herself on hard days.

“That’s what makes Jasmine different from the queens. She isn’t one of them at all. She’s a
lesbian, just like me, and Barb, and Lana.” Lesbian. Mary Eunice mulled over the word, not in regards to Jasmine, but thinking of herself, how personal it felt when it rolled smoothly off of Lois’s tongue like a magic spell, enrapturing and trapping her. Don’t be silly. You can’t be a lesbian. You’re a nun. “She loves her wife and her children. She just belongs to this world which doesn’t recognize or accept her, which—really, it makes her not all that different from the rest of us.” Lois tugged Mary Eunice’s legs apart to reach the inside of her thigh with the razor. The water already was clouded with hair, and Lois hadn’t yet finished one leg. “Was there anything else you wanted to know? You can ask me anything. I’m not as smart as Lana, but I’ll try my best to explain anything you didn’t understand.”

There is one question. Mary Eunice hesitated. Lois finished the inside of her thigh and wiped the remaining streaks of shaving cream off with a washcloth, and then she smoothed her hands over the newly bare skin. “I was wondering…” At the tentativeness of her voice, Lois lifted her head to meet her eyes, genuine and open. I want to know if your love is the same as mine. “How did you know, when you met Barb… How did you know you loved her? Or, that you wanted to be with her?” A deep frown troubled Lois’s mouth; the brightness in her beaming eyes dimmed, and Mary Eunice bit down on the tip of her tongue. I shouldn’t have said anything. “I—I’m sorry, I don’t mean to pry. You don’t have to tell me anything.”

“No, no, sweetie, it’s just fine!” Lois worked more shaving cream in her hands and lathered up and down Mary Eunice’s other leg. “I can tell you. It doesn’t bother me,” she reassured. Her voice raised in pitch. “I trust you. You’re one of us now, remember?” Mary Eunice nodded when Lois expected it of her. “It’s not the happiest story, but then, living with Lana, I guess you’re probably used to unhappy stories—it’s nothing compared to what she’s gone through…

“I had a steady boyfriend in high school. His name was Charles. I liked him because he didn’t push me too far or touch me too much, and my father approved of him. His family was wealthy. He was the whole reason I decided to go to college in the first place—because his parents were sending him away, and my parents wanted me to be with him. They didn’t understand why Charles hadn’t already married me when we graduated, and they wanted me to keep him on a tight leash. They were afraid I would lose him when he left, and I wouldn’t be with him, and he would find a better educated, prettier girl from some far-away place who could help him support the family financially.”

Lois paused and cleared her throat. She didn’t make eye contact with Mary Eunice as she spoke, focusing intently on the blades of the razor. She trailed her fingers over the last row she’d shaved in Mary Eunice’s field of peach fuzz, and dissatisfied with the results, she pitched it into the trashcan and took out a fresh razor. “But Charles could afford to live on campus, and I couldn’t stay with him, since the roommates had to be same-sex, and I couldn’t afford an independent dorm, either. So I took the little bit of money I’d saved up and started looking for an apartment and a roommate. That was when I met Barb. She had an apartment, and she wasn’t making rent by herself. Her last roommate had bolted in the middle of the night. She didn’t tell me why at first—of course, I figured it out later, when I realized she was a lesbian, that her last roommate had left because of that. I needed the place to stay, and the rent was cheap.”

Mary Eunice perked up at the first mention of Barb, the introduction of her to this story. Was it like the movies, where they loved one another at first sight? “Did you know, then? When you first met her?”

Tossing her head back, Lois laughed, a bright sound, shaking her head. “No, no. Believe me, I’m getting there. We didn’t even like each other much at first. I wanted to be her friend, but I was also attending college because of my boyfriend, so that meant I had to spend as much time with him as possible.” Her lips curled downward at the edges, like she tasted something bad, and likewise, Mary Eunice’s nose scrunched up, repulsed and confused at the thought of some man locking
arms with Lois, dragging her around with him, kissing her, doing all the things Mary Eunice had seen Barb do with her. She struggled to picture anyone other than Barb acting intimately with Lois, much less a man. “So my idea of a good time was inviting her out on double dates with Charles’s friends. She went with us a couple times, but I didn’t understand why none of the dates worked out for her. She would have a good time with the guy, but she would blow him off whenever he tried to go out with her a second time. And she spent so much time with Wendy, who was just her friend, as far as I knew. I couldn’t understand it—Barb spent more time with Wendy than I did with Charles.

“Even beyond that, I didn’t know what to make of her. She was the first woman I’d ever met who could look a man in the eye and give him a handshake to match his own. She didn’t let any man push her around. Hated doing housework. Charles stopped eating dinner at our apartment because Barb expected him to clean up after himself; she wouldn’t let me do it, even as I said I wanted to, I didn’t mind. I expected to marry him, after all, and that was just something you did for your husband. But Barb wouldn’t have it. He was going to wash dishes and clean up after himself while he was at her place, and that was that.” Lois chuckled, shaking her head. “It’s funny, now, that I ever thought that was acceptable. But then, I hated Barb for it. How dare she boss around my boyfriend and cause shit between the two of us. And I was jealous of her, of her nerve. In those days, she said she was going to be a surgeon, and she didn’t let anyone tell her a woman couldn’t be a surgeon. Barb was everything I wasn’t.”

As Lois fanned off the razor in the dirty, hairy water, Mary Eunice’s mouth turned downward. She struggled to imagine a world where Lois and Barb didn’t get along. “But—things changed, right?”

“Oh of course things changed. They got worse, first, before they got better. I mean, I disliked Barb, but Wendy was nice, and I could go on double dates with Lana and Victor, so I was linked with them. Lana never got as invested in Victor as I was in Charles. I thought I loved Charles. I thought that was what love felt like—the numbness, crying after he kissed me, lying there like a corpse during sex and accepting it because it made him feel good and that was my job. Lana never felt like that with Victor.” She cleared her throat. Her progress on shaving the leg had slowed; whenever she became too enraptured in the story, she stopped shaving to avoid nicking Mary Eunice and making her bleed. “I felt like I had a group of friends for the first time in my life, even if Barb and I didn’t get along the best.

“That was until one time, when I was doing laundry, and I thought Barb and Wendy had gone out, so I walked into her room to get her clothing, and—” A series of weak giggles broke forth from her, musical and yet nervous, wry; her red hair bounced with her shuddered laughter, and her brown eyes sparkled in the bright white light of the bathroom. “I nearly fainted. Wendy was between Barb’s legs. It was so strange—they’d been so quiet—they’d been so quiet—I didn’t know what to say.”

“Were you angry?” Mary Eunice ventured.

“Angry? I was furious! I’d been living with this lesbian for weeks, and I hadn’t had a clue. Once I realized what was going on, I called Lana, like—do you know your roommate has been fucking my roommate? She already knew. She begged me not to tell anyone. She said it was because her and Wendy were such good friends, and she couldn’t bear the thought of anything bad happening to her. I mean, I was outraged. I was ready to call the police.” Mary Eunice’s face fell in dismay. She could scarcely imagine Lois the way she spoke about herself, so hateful, so bigoted, so judgmental, just like the people Lana had to face daily, since the newspaper had outed her to the city. I can’t believe Lois was ever like that. “But Lana was the only friend I had left. I couldn’t risk losing her. I agreed to keep quiet. Wendy and Barb didn’t trust me. I mean, I don’t blame them, now. If someone found out about me and Barb, I would a nervous wreck. Someone like that could jeopardize our jobs—our house—our relationship—everything. They had good reason, not
wanting me around. Barb told me once the year lease was up, she would move out if I wouldn’t, and I agreed to that.”

Mouth open in a gape, Mary Eunice stared at Lois. “But—But—” What happened? She knew things couldn’t have gotten to that point. Or, at least, she hoped they hadn’t. Lois and Barb loved one another so much. Mary Eunice didn’t want to think of them hating each other, living in fear of one another, each tangled in the arms of another. “Why, how, what did you do?” Her cheeks tickled pink when she realized how she had stammered over her words in her eagerness and excitement to hear more. “I mean, what happened?”

Lois chuckled, humming in response. “Two things, really.” She drew the head of the razor up over her thigh and fanned it off in the water before starting again. “First, Wendy broke up with Barb. She said she was in love with someone else. We all knew it was Lana.” Lois tucked a string of red hair behind her own ear, leaving a streak of white foam on her cheek. “Barb was absolutely devastated. I found her like that, crying, right after Wendy had left—Wendy was crying too, but Barb just thought the world was ending. It was then, I think, I started to realize they weren’t really different from me. They had feelings like the rest of us. Except they loved each other. Real love, not like what Charles and I had.” She inclined one auburn eyebrow as she combed the razor down Mary Eunice’s leg and back up it again. “So I took care of Barb, because that was what I was good at. I bleached her hair and dolled her up to be a beautiful little thing, made her pretty as a doll, and I took the Polaroid that Charles’s family had bought him that he didn’t want, and we took pictures of each other until we ran out of film. We still have those pictures in our photo albums. It was really special.”

Mary Eunice asked, “What was the second thing?”

Another chuckle worked from Lois’s throat, but this one trembled with a light nervousness, a wry twist at the corner of her lips; she glanced up at Mary Eunice. Her tongue darted across her lips, the anxious gesture all too familiar to Mary Eunice. “Charles got me pregnant.” Oh. It settled in the pit of her stomach, cold and hard as dread; she wished she hadn’t asked. She chewed the inside of her cheek, wanting to apologize but reluctant to interrupt. “My parents insisted on a shotgun wedding, but his were too wealthy to allow that to happen. They wanted to make it an ostentatious affair. Something fancy and rich—and they didn’t want me to be pregnant in the pictures, either. It didn’t matter that our first child would be born out of wedlock. They didn’t give two shits about me or the baby.” Lois snorted, a rueful huff. “Neither did Charles, for that matter.”

“Barb said you didn’t like children.” The memory struck Mary Eunice, but her eyes widened when the mumble emerged aloud, and she scrambled to correct herself. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

Lois waved her off. “No, no, you’re right. I hate them. I think they’re horrible. I would’ve been a terrible mother.” Would’ve been. A certain heartbreak tinged Lois’s voice in spite of her harsh words, cracking the edges, the same way Lana’s anxiety crinkled at the corner of her hands and tensed in the knuckles of her hands. “I wasn’t enthusiastic, by any means, and neither was Charles. We didn’t hate each other—at least, not then—but we both dreaded the prospect of being chained to each other forever. We fought all the time. He hit me, once.” She paused to clear her throat, shaking her head. Her hair loosened with the movement, light glinting on it and setting fire to Mary Eunice’s eyes. “I came home with a black eye, and Barb took one look at me and just stormed out of the apartment. She came back a few hours later, all cut up and bleeding, all these scratches on her hands and face. She wouldn’t tell me where she’d been. But, the next day, I had a class with Lana, and she was the same way, looking like she’d taken a beating—ran into Wendy at lunch, and she spilled the beans. Told me they’d all dragged off and vandalized Charles’s car. You ever wonder where Lana got that genius plan for revenge? It was fresh from Barb knowing exactly what to do when she had a bone to pick with someone.”
“Did they get caught?”

“Caught?” Lois raised her eyebrows. “No, oh, no. The police interviewed me, but I didn’t tell them anything, and they didn’t think a pregnant college student would lie to them. They never pinned it on anyone. Charles had full coverage insurance, anyway.” A pinch on her leg caught Mary Eunice’s attention. *Ouch.* She said nothing, gazing at the tiny line where blood gathered into beads. “Sorry, sorry. Razor slipped.”

Lois frenzied to press a washcloth against the leaking wound. “It’s fine. It doesn’t hurt.” *Tell me more.* Mary Eunice bit her tongue. *Don’t. You can’t demand anything from her. She doesn’t owe you anything.* Lois had trusted her with this much; she was honored. She chewed her lip. *But I wanted her advice for Lana.* Guilt twisted inside of her as she pressed, “So he got a new car?”

Brown eyes glinted up to hers. “You like a good story, don’t you?” Mary Eunice blushed and averted her gaze. *Stupid stupid stupid. What do you think you’re doing? Lois is your friend. You shouldn’t push her for anything. You’re lucky she trusts you with anything. She doesn’t have a reason to. “Oh, don’t look like that, sweetie. I’m just teasing you. Yes, he got a new car.”* She pressed the cloth against the cut; she didn’t lift it yet to examine the damage. Her gaze became wistful. “It was late March when everything fell apart for good.

“It was bitterly cold—more cold than it should’ve been, for March, and it was snowing, just piling up in the road. Charles and I were drinking, both of us, in the apartment after Barb had gone to bed. We got into a terrible fight. I don’t remember what it was about. I just remember him dropping me—or sort of swinging me—sort of the way you would swing a glass bottle by the neck if you wanted to bust it. He dropped me like that on the kitchen floor. I grabbed onto the whole rack of pots and pans on the way down to keep from falling and made a crashing sound louder than two cars, and it woke up Barb. You can probably guess how she felt about finding us both like that.”

“Not happy,” Mary Eunice supposed. *What if someone did that to Lana?* She chewed the inside of her cheek. *What if someone put a hand on Lana where it didn’t belong? *I’d fight tooth and nail to keep her safe.* She had already placed herself in the face of danger to spare Lana, and she would do it again without question; Lana had gone through too much for Mary Eunice to allow anything else to harm her now.

Peeling back the cloth from the cut, Lois peeked at it, gave an affirmative nod, and continued shaving. “No. She was furious. She was so angry, I don’t even know how to describe it. Her face was redder than my hair. She grabbed one of the pots off of the floor and just jumped on him. Beat him with it like he was an aggressive dog.” Lois’s lips formed a firm line, not quivering with emotion nor glowing with joy. “She had him on the ground by the time I got up and pulled her off, told him to leave him alone. That didn’t make her happy, either. She told him to get the hell out of the house, and he wasn’t arguing. He took off.”

The bowl of water was clouded with fuzzy peach hair; it clung to the head of the razor whenever Lois shook it clean. Mary Eunice’s eyes fastened there, as Lois avoided eye contact with her, studying her leg like her life depended on its smoothness. Her hand brushed her nose in deep thought. “Barb took me to bed and tried to coddle me, and I was able to sleep, but by the next morning, I was bleeding. The cramps woke me up. They were crippling. I couldn’t even stand.” *Oh no.* Mary Eunice’s heart squelched with pity. She glanced up at Lois, but finding the redhead hadn’t moved her brown eyes from Mary Eunice’s kneecap, she didn’t seek eye contact, not wanting to press her. “The roads were too icy for the paramedics to get through—Barb tried to move her car in front of our apartment and slid it right into a tree. We were trapped.

“It was twelve hours before ambulance made it to us. Barb stayed with me the whole time. By the end, I was barely with her. I kept passing out; I thought it was from the pain, but the doctor at the
hospital said it was because of the blood loss.” Lois tugged up the hem of her shirt to reveal a scar stretching down from her belly button, vanishing down into her pants; a horizontal scar intersected it, forming a tent of squishy flesh there on her lower abdomen. “I already knew the baby was gone. I hadn’t felt it move for hours. Barb was still hopeful, but…” Her lips flexed into a sad grimace. “It was a girl.”

She dropped her shirt. It fell and masked the scar tissue. “Barb called Charles while I was still waking up from surgery. He told her to tell me to keep the ring. I pawned it to pay for the cremation. Barb took the ashes to the beach and scattered them in the sand.” A single tear slid down Mary Eunice’s cheek, but Lois hadn’t broken and begun to cry. Pull yourself together. She dabbed her own tear away. “And then we went home. I didn’t want to stay in school—not knowing I’d still have to see him, after everything that happened. I dropped out and got a job sweeping at a salon. Barb kept studying hard, working as a CNA. She was there the whole time.” With a wet washcloth, she wiped the last remnants of the shaving cream off of Mary Eunice’s legs, testing each of them with her index finger for smoothness. “She decided she didn’t want to be a surgeon anymore, after what she’d seen with me. I guess cutting dead babies out of people was a deal-breaker for her. We became a thing a few months after that, when I realized all the time I spent wishing I could date a woman was wasted, since I could date a woman, and there was one I loved very much keeping me warm at night.”

Brown eyes flicked back up to Mary Eunice, and the solemn conversation hadn’t twisted her expression; she smiled, genuine and glowing. “I told you before. I wouldn’t change anything about my life. I’m glad I was brought here—to be with you, now. I wouldn’t be straight if I had the opportunity. Being this way, it isn’t a choice, but if it were, I would choose it time and time again.” She poured the dirty water out in the tub, washing all the hair out of it; Mary Eunice brushed a finger against her lower thigh. Wow. Her marvel reflected on her face, as Lois’s smile widened into a grin, crinkling at the corners of her eyes. “Do you like it?”

I’m not certain. The smooth skin rolled under her fingertips like an expanse of the ocean’s blue-gray waves, but without the protective layer of hair shielding her shins and calves, vulnerability struck her. “I feel like a little girl again.” I haven’t been so smooth since I was ten years old. “It’s so soft.” She lifted her eyes back to Lois’s. “Thank you.”

Lois tugged her up from the toilet and dragged her to the mirror. “Let’s get your dress on you, and then I can start on your hair and makeup. That’s what’s going to take awhile.” Her nimble hands slipped under Mary Eunice’s shirt and tugged it up over her head. “You’ll have to lose your bra. It’s open-backed. Sorry.” Heat crawled up Mary Eunice’s face. She reached behind her back to unsnap her bra while Lois went to fetch the dress. The cool air of the house hardened her nipples, pink pebbles on her flat expanse of ivory flesh. Lois scrambled to tug the dress over her head, looping the knot around the back of her neck. Lip caught between her teeth, Lois took the zipper in the back and pulled it up. “Oh, this looks lovely on you.”

“Thank you.” Mary Eunice fiddled with the sheer fabric, its white color and soft texture. I look like a bridesmaid. She touched her face, watching as the reflection performed the same action, confirming it was, indeed, her and not some horrible doppelganger. “I don’t think I’ve ever looked so nice,” she admitted. With the big toe of her right foot, she brushed up and down the hairless skin of her left leg.

A bright laugh came from Lois’s parted lips. She spun Mary Eunice around and pushed her to sit back on the toilet. “I’m glad you like it,” she said. She held a brush in one hand. As she gathered up Mary Eunice’s long hair, she glanced down at her, one eyebrow raised. “Are you going to tell me why you want to know my and Barb’s love story?” Cold crawled toward her extremities, filling them, hands shivering, at the confrontational question. I’m sorry. Her panic strangled her voice. But Lois’s stern look dissipated into empathy. “It’s Lana, isn’t it?”
Thin as tissue paper, Mary Eunice managed, "Yeah." Her right hand picked at the scabs on her left arm. "I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry." The bristles of the brush caressed her scalp, massaging it; Lois had a professional hand, not tugged at the silky tresses as she combed through them. “I’ve been thinking about her—a lot.”

A gentle hand touched her cheek, dragging back the spry, new hairs from around her ears. “You don’t have to apologize, sweetie. I was teasing you.” She worked through those most sensitive hairs easily. “You know there’s nothing wrong with loving a woman the way most people love a man. You have to be willing to give yourself the freedom to feel things. I don’t know much about the becoming-a-nun process, but I’m pretty sure it doesn’t make you a heartless robot the moment you take your vows.”

“I—I know—” Mary Eunice stammered. Sweat boiled to her palms, and she had nothing to wipe them on, afraid of tarnishing the beautiful ivory dress. “I know how I feel, but I don’t… I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to scare Lana, or hurt her, but I don’t like to keep secrets from her—I’ve already almost told her what I’m making her for Christmas like, three times. I’m a horrible liar.” She swallowed hard, trying to moisten her mouth, which had dried, her tongue sponging up all of her saliva. “I don’t expect anything from her. She doesn’t owe me anything. It’s not her fault that I—I fell in love with her.” Oof. The last words dragged up out of her throat like someone had lassoed them and snatched on them while they clung and fought to remain sheltered and safe.

A few snipping sounds alarmed her, but Lois held her head steady as she cut away the dead, splitting ends on her hair. “Honey, you won’t scare Lana. She’s been an out lesbian for fifteen years. You loving her won’t frighten her any more than a fly landing on her leg.” Trimmed bits of yellow hair fell to the tile floor. “But she has seen a lot, and she’s been through a lot.” I know. Mary Eunice’s stomach ached with Lois’s revelation. I know she can never love me. “She and Wendy were together longer than me and Barb—they were friends for twenty-odd years. That doesn’t just disappear overnight.”

Mary Eunice bobbed her head, eyes cast down at the floor, watching the wisps of hair dance there. “I know. I don’t want her to love me back.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m pretty sure she loves you back.”

Lips parted, Mary Eunice gawped at her. “What? No, there’s no way—you just said—”

“I said her feelings for Wendy wouldn’t disappear overnight. But that doesn’t mean she can’t love you. Feelings are complicated.” Lois placed the scissors on the counter and continued to stroke her fingers through Mary Eunice’s long hair. “I’ve seen the way she looks at you, sweetheart. Like she’s just riveted on you. Like you’re the last person left on earth and the only thing holding her to the ground.” Delicate fingers spun through her hair in the distinct tugging pattern of a braid. “It’s not easy for someone like Lana. After what happened to Wendy, and how she blames herself for it… Those two, they were inseparable. But if she loves anyone, she loves you. I know that for sure. Her life is dark as the night sky, right now, and she looks at you like you’re the moon—like you’re the only drop of sunlight she’ll ever hold again.”

Mary Eunice averted her eyes. “Lana calls me sunshine,” she admitted. Her teeth plucked up her lower lip, and she curled her toes where they rested on the tile, rapping there. Lois gave an approving hum. It makes me so happy when she calls me that. I want to be her sunshine forever. “And she cuddles with me in bed, at night, when it gets too cold…” I turn down the furnace at night so we can spend more time holding one another. Her cheeks discolored; she hadn’t confessed to Lana why she changed the home temperature at night. The guise of saving money on the utility bill sated both of them. “What should I do?” she asked, hesitant, afraid. She wanted to lift her eyes back to Lois to receive the advice, but she didn’t dare move her head and disrupt the intricate braiding process.
Fingers paused in her hair. “That’s a difficult question to answer, sweetie. What do you want to come of it?” Mary Eunice quirked her eyebrows, pursing her lips in confusion. “I mean, do you want to be Lana’s girlfriend? You’re in a different position than the rest of us were, when we realized who we were—who we loved.”

Oh. Right. Toes drumming on the tile, Mary Eunice sucked on the raw spot of her lower lip. “I—I don’t know.” Her sweaty hands wrung in front of her body. You were foolish to consider anything. You were foolish to ask. What do you expect to happen? You’ll just make Lana uncomfortable. “God is all I’ve ever known. Being a nun is all I’ve ever been good at.” And, sooner than she liked to consider, her calling would reclaim her and place her somewhere new, somewhere far away from Lana, much as she loathed to linger on the thought.

Lois tied off her hair, only halfway down, and she dropped the blonde locks and rounded on Mary Eunice, both sympathetic golden-brown eyes fixed on hers; she crouched before Mary Eunice so they were eye-to-eye. “If Lana walked in this room right now—if she just flung that door open and came to you and said, ‘Mary Eunice, I want to be your girlfriend,’ what would you do?”

She sucked her teeth, louder than she intended. “I don’t know,” she repeated, softer, lowering her head. Her hands caught one another by the wrists and squeezed tight on the lumpy bones underneath, spidery fingers interlocking and breaking free and catching again. “I love Lana.” The whisper no longer hurt to admit. She loved Lana. It frightened her, its implications and consequences. “But—she—she—” Swallowing hard, she managed to press, “I don’t know if I love her more than God.” I don’t feel God anymore. Tears sprang to her eyes, but she refused to shed them, looking anywhere but at Lois to try and disguise her emotions where they refused to settle inside of her stomach. Lois was not Father Joseph; she couldn’t wantonly pour all of her religious doubts onto Lois’s shoulders and expect to receive honest and wise reassurance in return.

Lana has been here since I lost God. Lana had loved and supported her when everyone and everything else had failed her. Lana had held her through those cold nights when the shadows crawled behind her eyes and cast her into darkness. Lana had healed her when her illness confused her. Lana had forgiven her when she spoke or acted out of turn.

But she couldn’t fool herself into thinking God hadn’t done the same on all of the frigid nights at Briarcliff when the wind poured in through her broken window, when the moans of the sick and the dying quivered in the walls, when pneumonia traveled from body to body and stacked the corpses higher than the hearses could carry them away, when food ran short and she forced herself through the dizzying hunger to slice the last loaves of bread and split them between the neediest patients. Like in the famed “Footprints” poem, God had carried her through her harshest tribulations. She couldn’t allow temptation to draw her away.

Was Lana a temptation? Lana didn’t feel like any temptation Mary Eunice had ever known. She had blessed Mary Eunice’s life in every way. God sent her to me. He must have. Maybe this is meant to be. But leaving the sisterhood? She couldn’t fathom it. If God had chosen such a path for her, she didn’t have the strength to follow it on her own feet. She needed guidance. She needed an unbiased eye. Even Father Joseph couldn’t provide such a thing; he viewed Lana as an affliction. He would never accept Mary Eunice’s evidence. He would tell her about all of the tricks the Devil could play on her, as if she hadn’t seen more of the Devil’s tricks from inside her own head than most people could imagine. I want someone to tell me what to do. Mary Eunice knew how to take orders. Sister Jude had adored her for it. I wish I could talk to Jude now. She didn’t wish it for hope of Jude offering support—Jude would never have blessed such a relationship—but so she could observe Jude’s stern, matriarchal prowess one last time. If she observed one final time, maybe she could learn to don the coat of responsibility herself.

A tender finger brushed her cheek, leaving a cold smear in its wake, and Mary Eunice flinched in
“Don’t cry about it, baby. I don’t mean to pressure you.” She hadn’t realized the tear sliding from her eye until Lois caught it with her thumb. Big, misty blue eyes found Lois’s in the sheer light of the bathroom. “You don’t have to cry. You don’t have to know right now. Love is really confusing. I know that as good as anybody. You love Lana, and that’s a good thing. It’s always a good thing. Love can’t be bad. That’s against the very nature of it.”

Mary Eunice bobbed her head in agreement. *Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in truth. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.* “I would imagine you know a lot more about love than the rest of us.” Lois’s eyes crinkled at the corners as she spoke, friendly and kind. “You’re a bit higher up on the chain of being, y’know.” She cupped Mary Eunice under the chin, tilting her head up to make eye contact with her.

A pink blush tinged Mary Eunice’s cheeks at the proximity between hers and Lois’s faces. “I don’t know anything about love. I don’t know anything about *anything*. I’ve—I’ve always just been Mary. My mama called me by both names so people wouldn’t mix me with every other Mary from here to Bethlehem, but I always knew I was as ordinary as a blue sky. I’m not special, or holy—I don’t even know God as well as I thought I did—I don’t even know if I ever knew God at all.” She paused to take a deep breath as her insecurities scrambled to the surface and twisted her language into a garbled, vulnerable mess. “I’m just dumb ole Mary.”

Lois shook her head. The ginger hair quivered and fell in locks, framing her pretty, round face with the generous smattering of freckles across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. “You’re not dumb. I promise you that.” She tucked a loose strand of hair behind Mary Eunice’s ear. “And tonight, you’re not ole Mary, either.” She grinned. All of the troubles slipped from her expression, replaced by glee. “Tonight, you’re Marilyn Monroe, and you’re going to knock the socks off of every man and dyke in this city—Lana included. I guarantee it.” Mary Eunice flushed at the mere thought.

“I don’t think so.

Lana could never idealize her. Lana was too perfect, too beautiful, too much of everything Mary Eunice was not and would never become. “Let me finish your hair, and then I’ll start on your makeup.”

Barb arrived late, at nearly five o’clock, while Lana finished hanging up the decorations. “Sorry,” she apologized, ducking past the hanging plant which Lana stuffed with fake cobwebs from her position on the step ladder. “This is minimalistic. Lois would’ve decorated if you’d asked.” She wore her scrubs, but she carried a bag of clothes under one arm. “I would’ve been earlier, but I forgot my costume. Had to run back home and grab it.”

Snorting, Lana inclined her eyebrows. “Lois is already decorating Sister Mary Eunice. They’ve been in the bathroom for three hours.” Gus lounged beside her on the porch, stretched out with his tongue spilling out of his mouth. He rolled onto his back, presenting his belly to Barb as she passed by. “Pet him, will you?” Lana hung a couple orange and black streamers from the gutter. “Ew. It’s gross up here.” She taped up the streamers in a crooked, uncaring fashion. “It’s not like anyone is going to show up, anyway.” She’d heard from her coworkers those weeks ago—nobody cared to bring their children trick-or-treating to the queer house. The company of Lois and Barb only left her more uneasy with the matter; if someone spotted them and recognized them, they would wind up in hot water. “What’s your costume?”

“I got a mask for Vincent Price’s character in *House of Wax*, Professor Henry Jarrod. Gonna throw on some black pants and a cape and a hat, and I’ll be good to go.” *Thank god it’s a mask.* Lana swallowed the dry lump in her throat as the anxiety dissipated. Barb preserved her safety behind a children’s Halloween mask; she hoped Lois had had the forethought for the same. Barb
bent over beside Gus and scratched his exposed belly. Lana studied his ribcage, where the bones still protruded but not as much as they had just a short few weeks ago. “What are you going to go as? Gonna match Marilyn Monroe?”

Lana hopped down from the step ladder and folded it up. “No. Can you keep a secret for an hour?” Barb nodded and shrugged, though an eye-roll punctuated her expression. She’s right. You’re being silly. “I’m not kidding. I want to surprise Mary Eunice. I’m going to wear her habit. I washed it after she left church the last time and tried it on.” She propped up the step ladder against the side of the porch. Gus popped up when she approached and butted his head against her thigh. “Do you need time to get dressed?”

“No. Do you need more help patching things up?”

“I haven’t made the candy bowl yet, but that’ll take all of five minutes.”

“Ten if we dip into it while we’re combining it.”

Lana grinned, tossing her head back in a laugh. The normality of it all surrounded her, celebrating another holiday, the mirth of good company, even with all of Barb’s crude, pointed humor. As they re-entered the house, she lifted her eyes to the hallway, half-expecting to see Wendy there, coming up the hall, emerging from the bedroom, dancing in the kitchen. The bright notion dimmed in half of a second. The punch in her gut sickened and silenced her.

Brushing her hand against her wrist, Barb flanked Lana. “Hey,” she interrupted, soft; all of the crude bits vanished from her face. “You’re allowed to be happy, you know. She would want that. She wouldn’t be jealous. Now, if it were me, I would be fucking pissed off, but Wendy wouldn’t be.” She didn’t grab Lana’s hand; she maintained a respectful distance, which Lana appreciated, tucking her hands out of Barb’s reach. “She would want you to be happy. I know that. She loved you so much.”

“I know,” Lana assured. “I know, I just... miss her.” I would spend the rest of my life in Thredson’s basement to see her again. Her eyes misted over. I would marry him to tell her how much I love her, and how sorry I am. Barb’s expression filled with concern. Lana cleared her throat. She couldn’t afford to break in front of Barb. Those were her private moments, reserved only for herself and for Mary Eunice; how her friendship with Mary Eunice had become more intimate than the people she had known for fifteen years, she didn’t know, but she didn’t protest the inclination which told her not to reveal the depth of her troubles to Barb. “Would you really be upset, though? Your track record isn’t exactly clear.”

“My track record?” Barb scoffed at the notion, rolling her eyes as she headed into the kitchen. “You and Wendy always had the same beef about me being a flirt.” Lana shot her a sideways look. Just a flirt? She cut open one of the bags of sweets and poured them into one of two large bowls. “Don’t look at me like that. I’ve slept with one woman since I got with Lois, and she told me I could. I didn’t like it. It didn’t feel right. You both like to treat me like a criminal ‘cause I dance with someone else or slap another ass, but that doesn’t bother Lois. We’ve talked about it before—”

“Barb, what you and Lois do in your relationship doesn’t affect me at all. I don’t care if you’ve done a hundred women or none of them.”

Crossing her arms, Barb arched a dark brow at her. “Then why do you want to talk about my track record?”

“I was teasing. You don’t have to explain anything to me. You don’t owe me anything.” She mixed up the miscellaneous wrapped candies with her hands, getting a good assortment of the
types in each bowl. “I know you wouldn’t do anything to hurt her. Honestly, what do you think I am? The dyke police?”

Barb stuck her tongue out at Lana in return and shuffled beside her to help sort through the things. “It’s hard enough being lesbians without judging each other for promiscuity that isn’t even actually there.” Her voice held an irritated grumble, eyes set narrowed and hands pinched just a little too tight for Lana’s tastes. “We did talk about it,” she insisted, and this time, Lana didn’t interrupt her. She wants to tell me. She needs to get it off of her chest. And while Lana didn’t care about Barb’s sex life—she preferred to ignore it as much as possible—she cared about Barb as her friend.

“Right when we first got together. She didn’t want to have sex with me, because she thought it would be bad, like it was with her boyfriend, and she kept catching me getting off, and finally, she told me—if it was so bad for me, she didn’t care if I ran off with some girl from Pat Joe’s, as long as it wasn’t at our house. And I did it. I caught up with that toothless junkie with the guitar and let her play ‘Some Enchanted Evening’ and then I had sex with her. And it was hard. She couldn’t get me off. I was frustrated, and I was worried about Lois, and I was wishing I was with her instead the whole time. I went home to her that night and told her I couldn’t do that again. I told her I would wait for her, and I did, for a year and a half.” Her eyes narrowed as she fixed the scrutinizing gaze back on Lana, mouth set into a firm line. “I’m not a whore. I can talk pretty to any lady who looks my way, but at the end of the day, I’m sleeping beside the woman I love, and it’s going to be like that until the day I die.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Lana pointed out, quiet, as she arched a teasing eyebrow at Barb in return. “Would you be upset or wouldn’t you?”

A blank look followed, but it dawned on Barb, and she shook her head. “No, I… I wouldn’t be.” She averted her eyes, staring hard at the candy like she thought it would explode if she removed her intense gaze from it. “If something happened to me, I would want Lois to be happy. I might think it was odd if her new roommate was a nun, but—well, we all know what Wendy taught all of her classes.”

“Different strokes for different folks,” Lana said in a dark chuckle. “She loved to teach them about diversity and inclusivity. Loved having a desegregated classroom. That was part of the joy for her, I think, being able to give them something we didn’t have when we were in school, even when we were in college.”

“It was all part of the joy for her. She loved teaching more than anything.” Barb nodded once to her, taking her by the elbow. “C’mon, let’s get dressed. We can pilfer candy while those two are putting on the finishing touches. “

“What was Lois going as?”

“Minnie Mouse. I convinced her to invest in a mask instead of spending so much time on makeup, so she should be good on time.” As they entered the bedroom, Barb called through the bathroom door, “Honey? We’re short on time. Hurry up and finish with your princess nun. Are you almost done?”

Lois’s indignant voice called back, “Almost! You can’t rush art!” The sound of Mary Eunice’s muffled laughter sang back through to them, and Lana softened as it met her ears. Lois hasn’t driven her too crazy, if she can still laugh about it. She must be enjoying herself. She probably is. She’s probably never been pampered before. I hope Lois didn’t overreact too much. I hope she doesn’t look too gaudy. Lana resisted the urge to make the Sign of the Cross, a silent prayer lifted to an entity whose existence she didn’t believe in—a prayer for Lois to rein in her inner artist and dial back her style to preserve Mary Eunice’s prudence.
Tugging out the habit from the closet, Lana took it from the hanger and lifted it over her body, finding it fit long on her but otherwise fine around the middle; she zipped it up the back, and then she tucked her hair back to fit neatly beneath the coif. “Does this look alright?” she asked Barb, who shrugged behind a grotesque mask with flesh hanging off of it like melting flesh. “That’s really gross. Who made that movie?”

She fastened the cape around the front. “I don’t know. It’s Vincent Price’s character. I like him a lot. His manner of speaking.” Her hands stilled, and her speech paused as her eyes found Lana’s again, more hesitant and considerate. “Is it okay?” she asked. “I can take it off—”

“No, no, it’s fine!” Don’t take it off. Don’t let anyone see you without it. Lana had to pause to take a deep breath. Inside, she ached, wondering if this Halloween thing was a good idea after all. “I’m fine. Really. I’m not a faberge egg, I promise. But your cape is crooked. Tug it to the left.”

The bathroom door swung open, and Lois emerged first, red hair streaming behind the Minnie Mouse mask. “Ta-da!” she proclaimed, pointing back to Mary Eunice, who had become someone else entirely. Her long blonde hair was spun into a delicate braid, wrapped around her head so it didn’t fall past the nape of her neck; the ivory dress clung to her figure and fell right at her knees; she entered the room on low heels, legs pressed together and hands knotted in front of her body with fear upon her face. “Isn’t she great?” Modest makeup accentuated her beautiful azure eyes with dark lines around them, pink blush to her cheeks, and contours giving her a strange light. Her legs are shaved.

Both of the flabbergasted women ogled at the spectacle, the nun-turned-model under Lois’s hands. Mary Eunice’s eyes found Lana first, and she brightened with a grin. It took Lana a moment to realize Mary Eunice had just seen her wearing the habit, and even then, she couldn’t remark on it, too preoccupied by the marvel which was her cherished friend, her unrequited love, dolled up to such a degree. The Monsignor is going to kill me. Father Joseph is going to kill her. Mother Superior is going to freak.

Barb managed to speak first. “Girl, you look…” She was breathless. “You look good.”

All of Lana’s thoughts stuck somewhere in her throat, and as Mary Eunice’s face fell into anxiety, Lois pressed her, “Well? What do you think?”

“She looks like walking sex.” The blunt edge of Lana’s tongue rose to the surface before she could stifle it. Oh, yes, Mary Eunice looked good. How high up did Lois shave? she wanted to know. Her eyes slipped up the exposed legs to the deep V of the dress’s neck, far lower than any clergy member should have borne. Her exposed shoulders revealed a pale smattering of freckles; the tufts of dark cream hair had vanished from her armpits, left as smooth as her legs. A visible blush, crimson in its hue, crawled up Mary Eunice’s neck, and she fidgeted with her hands, tugging on the front of the dress in her shame. God, she’s so fucking beautiful. The urge swelled in Lana to grab Mary Eunice and kiss her and swaddle her and keep her, in all of her fancy newness, safe in the shelter of their bedroom, protected from the eye of the judgmental public.

Swallowing a hard lump in her throat, Lana amended, “You look good,” but the crinkles of fear around Mary Eunice’s eyes didn’t fade. She approached in the empty space. Lois retreated from her side to Barb. Lana took one of Mary Eunice’s hands; a sheen of clear fingernail polish coated her nails, which Lois had filed over smooth in spite of their short, bitten length all the way down to the quick.

Barb nudged Lois. “C’mon, Minnie Mouse. Your ears are crooked.” She slid an arm around Lois’s middle and tugged her out of the bedroom into the hallway; they vanished from view, leaving Lana and Mary Eunice alone together.
Lana lifted her big brown eyes to Mary Eunice’s face, where Lois had tied her hair in such an intricate braid, she feared brushing it with her hand would ruin it. Mary Eunice spoke first, to her surprise. “My religion isn’t a costume, Lana.”

The sharp words took her aback. Her eyes widened. “Do you want me to take it off?” Of course it isn’t a costume. This is a symbol of her faith—something you don’t share. Lana wet her lips with her tongue, surprised how the inside of her mouth had dried since seeing Mary Eunice decked out from head to toe. A tingle squeezed in the lowest part of her gut and trickled down into her crotch like an icy fire. Her delayed response didn’t help to disguise her distractions. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think it would bother you.”

“It doesn’t, it—it’s fine.” Mary Eunice averted her eyes, tugging her hand back. No, wait. Lana grappled to keep their fingers in that loose clasp which she adored so much, but Mary Eunice continued to drag back until Lana relinquished her. Her pale, sweaty hands folded up into each other again, clutched at her chest and rolling with nervousness. “Do you really not like it?”

“No! No, I mean, yes, I mean—” Lana sucked in a deep breath, her vehement response sparking a dance of confusion against Mary Eunice’s face. “I love it. I think it looks great. You look wonderful.” You’re breathtaking. You’re so beautiful. I could sweep you into my arms and kiss you forever. I don’t want anyone else to see you like this. She longed to reach out and cradle the other’s cheek, but she didn’t for fear of disturbing the makeup for which Lois had slaved. “Do you like it? I know it’s not your thing.”

“I…” She bit her lower lip. “I feel beautiful, but I’m—I’m not incredibly comfortable, no.” Her brows quirked in the middle. “My legs are all itchy.” Lana chuckled at the blunt words. “I feel… naked. Exposed.” A smudge of lipstick caught on her front teeth where they’d touched her lip. “But Lois enjoyed herself, and that’s what matters. She deserved to have a little bit of fun with her makeup and things. I want her to be happy.”

Lana frowned. “You matter, too. Your comfort matters.” Mary Eunice shrugged it off, pretty eyes averted. “Do you not want to go outside? You don’t have to. It won’t hurt Lois’s feelings. She wouldn’t want you to be uncomfortable, especially knowing she did this to you.”

Shaking her head, Mary Eunice waved off the notion. “I’m fine.” Her lips tinted up into a slight smile. “After Pat Joe’s, I think I can handle anything.” Spidery white hands flitted out to adjust Lana’s coif and veil. “You’ve got your hair all tangled up in this. Here, let me fix it.” She softened, the corners of her eyes relaxing from the first accusation. Lana turned around; Mary Eunice’s heels granted her more than enough height to fiddle with Lana’s hair and clothing. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you.” She tugged Lana’s hair out from under the coif and adjusted it, fitting it so it didn’t pull her hair as much. “I think you look very nice.” Her voice was muted, and she smoothed her hand over the heavy black veil, successfully hiding all of Lana’s brunette hair; as Lana faced her once again, she flashed a huge smile and draped the rosary around her neck, like she had the night of the storm, when they found Gus. “I’ve been praying.”

“About tonight?” Mary Eunice hummed her agreement, maintaining eye contact with Lana. The rosary isn’t for matching the costume. The realization struck Lana when the concern crossed Mary Eunice’s face, unadulterated worry pinching between her eyebrows. She fingered the crucifix where it fell just below her collar. “Don’t worry.” Her words tasted wrong on her tongue. “Everything will be fine, I promise.” You’re lying to her. You’re scared shitless.

The lies didn’t pass over Mary Eunice, either; in spite of all her naivete, she recognized something about Lana, something in her dishonesty, and her mouth flattened out. “But you said, a few weeks ago, when I asked—you said you didn’t want to do Halloween because of the people. What if someone tries to hurt you? I don’t want you to be in danger.”
“I’m not in any danger.” This wasn’t a lie, not as much as the last one. I know you’ll protect me, as much as I hate myself for it. I know you’ll be there, no matter what happens, to hold my hand. I know you’re not going anywhere. “I promise. We’re just going to hand out some candy. Nobody’s going to try and hurt me. Probably nobody’s going to show up at all, actually. And Barb and Lois are here, too. We’ll be fine.”

Glossy lips pursed with apprehension, but Mary Eunice didn’t argue. “I love you,” she whispered instead. Her expression was the same as always, filled with adoration and honesty which Lana could not deny, but something else rested in those depths, something vulnerable and new and precious. What’s going through your head? Lana wanted to ask. Don’t worry your pretty little mind.

She didn’t ask those questions. “I love you, too, sunshine.” As always, the nickname made her brighten like a flower blossoming after a heavy rain. Lana popped up onto her tiptoes with puckered lips, but she couldn’t reach Mary Eunice’s face with the high heels. “Kiss me,” she urged, plaintive and honest. The vulnerability, the unknown storm in Mary Eunice’s eyes, bloomed into shadow, but she leaned forward regardless, planting a chaste kiss on Lana’s lips. She wiped her mouth to ensure none of the lipstick had worn off on her. “Are you okay?” she asked Mary Eunice, a quirk of concern coming to her lips. Is it me? Are you afraid of me? Do you not want to kiss me? Are you worried I might hurt you? Lana couldn’t help her insecurities bubbling to the surface. She had taken advantage of Mary Eunice’s kindness and tolerance, but it could all end in a heartbeat—would end, undoubtedly, if Mary Eunice did not want it. I’m taking too much from her. I’m showing too much. She can never know how I feel.

To the question, Mary Eunice nodded. “I’m fine.”

Lana forced a smile, and she offered her hand. Mary Eunice accepted it and squeezed tight, fingers all bowed into mountainous knuckles and valleys between them, latching like a key in a lock. “Alright. Let’s go have some fun, alright? And afterward, I can eat the leftover candy, and you can watch me make myself sick.” A giggle burbled from between her lips, and satisfied she had settled the situation for now, Lana led the way up the hallway after their friends.

Chapter End Notes

I'm trying weekly updates again! It will depend on a week to week basis how much time I have, but hopefully I'll be fairly consistent with my schedule. My outline says there's roughly twenty-five chapters left (of course, my outline is an organic thing, so it will vary), and I don't want to be publishing this story for the rest of my life!

Thanks for reading, and as always, I appreciate all comments. My tumblr, thefandomlesbian, is open to receive comments, questions, messages, asks, anything you like! I'm really loving this piece, and I enjoy sharing it.

Thank you all!
The October sunset dimmed over the horizon as they all stood under the porch light, Mary Eunice shivering in her dress and Lana hovering beside her. The clock hadn't yet struck six, but as Lana surveyed the street left and right, a thought struck her. What if nobody comes? She pursed her lips at the prospect. If no one came? Well, she supposed she would invite Barb and Lois to stay for a few hours while they cleaned up all the candy Lana had purchased, and then she would know better for next year; no one wanted queer candy. In fact, she favored that possibility of the outcome of events. It required no outpouring of emotion from her, nor any effort except irritation at the general community prejudice.

However, her prayers went unanswered. As the clock struck six, a hoard of costume-clad minions appeared down the street. Mary Eunice's blue eyes flicked up to hers, and they inched apart like slugs. Goosebumps covered Mary Eunice's arms and legs, and she smoothed her hands over them to try to warm herself, but she couldn't quite manage. Lana longed to wrap her in a warm hug, especially clad in the heavy black weight of the habit, but with the public so near, she didn't dare risk such a move. The day in the park had passed. She was not invincible. These people knew her, they likely knew Mary Eunice from the newspaper, and Lana did not want harm to come to anyone on her account.

The first bundle of children toddled down the street, four or five of them with two women supervising. As the child in the lead turned on the sidewalk to head up the walk to Lana's porch, one of the adults grabbed him by the shoulder and redirected him. "Not there," she said. Her next words were inaudible, but she cast a loathing glance straight at Lana, flicked it to Mary Eunice, and snatched two of the children by the hands to keep them marching down the sidewalk like tiny soldiers headed into combat.

From behind her wax mask, Barb shot Lana a skeptical, sideways look. "Do you think it's going to be like this all night?" Lana shrugged in response, unable to meet her eyes. Maybe. It stung her insides. Wendy had always loved handing out candy with her; she adored seeing her students—former, current, and future—coming around the house all decked out in their beautiful costumes, loved to fill their buckets with candy and give them more than she and Lana had known as children growing in the depression. But things had changed. Wendy would never have wanted the house to be empty on Halloween. She swallowed hard, averting her gaze to the planks of the porch, and in spite of the heavy black habit, a shiver passed over her shoulders. A vacant porch on Halloween—perhaps it represented her life, void of all the joy she had once known and cherished.

"I'll get some lawn chairs from the shed," Mary Eunice said. She settled one arm on the inside of Lana's elbow and flashed a smile. It didn't reach her eyes, which had crinkles of concern at the edges, but the warm flush of her touch eased the knots in Lana's stomach. Her low heels clicked on the steps, and they squished through the damp grass, each footfall eliciting a mucky sound. Her exposed skin tinted red from the chill, crossed arms smoothing up and down one another to eliminate the goosebumps.

Once she rounded the corner of the house and was out of earshot, Lois said, "Maybe that dress
wasn't a very good idea in this weather. She looks awfully cold. I wish Halloween was in July—that would be a lot more comfortable for everyone." She tutted in response, shaking her head. After a hesitant moment, she turned to peek at Lana through her Minnie Mouse mask. The shy look caught Lana's eye, and she straightened, a frown pursing upon her lips. "Lana, do you…" She squinted. "What do you think of Mary Eunice? Sister Mary Eunice, I mean."

"As opposed to the other Mary Eunice who isn't a Sister?" Barb said, voice dry, but she fell silent under Lois's sharp look.

Lana plucked her lower lip between her teeth. "What do you mean, what do I think of her?" Lois shrugged. *Something's up.* Her feigned nonchalance failed, dying somewhere in her eyes. "Is something the matter?" Lana glanced to Barb; though Lana couldn't make out her fine features behind the wax mask, Barb's eyes had fixed on Lois in equal confusion. "Did she tell you something? Is there something wrong with her?"

"No—No, of course not!" Lois took a few short steps to Lana's side and pressed a light palm to her shoulder. *Good god, I'm tense.* The massaging fingers gave her realization, and she sucked in a deep breath, forcing herself to ease. "I'm just wondering. She talks to me, you know. Nothing bad, don't worry. But you know that girl absolutely worships you, Lana." Behind the heavy mask, Lois's brown eyes crinkled with some emotion Lana couldn't identify. *She isn't telling me everything.* All of Lana's journalistic senses tingled, sensing omissions at every word. "She loves you a whole lot. That's just why I was asking. I wondered if you thought the same of her—I mean, we both read your piece in the paper, but… I guess I was just curious."

Heart plummeting into the pit of her stomach, Lana gulped around a budding lump in her throat. Her mouth dried. She sucked her front teeth and traced her tongue over them; the smooth texture distracted from her words as she dared to part her lips and utter, "I love Mary Eunice, too. She's a great friend."

Barb's hard gaze landed on the side of her face; she refused to face the scrutinizing eyes. "Just a friend?" she pressed. "Girl, you look at her like the stars align on her face." Lana flinched. *Am I so transparent?* She lifted her gaze back to Barb's, obscure behind the plastic wax mask; it made her seem more distant, more foreign, less like a trusted friend and more like a stranger pressing for information; her heart startled in her chest, and she had to rip her gaze away from Barb's costume. *Don't be stupid. You know Barb. You've known her for fifteen years.* She couldn't settle her chest or stomach. *What's the matter with me?* "I don't mean anything by it, Lana, but—are you sure there isn't a little bit more there? Maybe than you want there to be?"

To her fortune, the familiar sound of Barb's voice grounded her. As long as she didn't look at the grotesque mask, she recognized her friend. *It wasn't a bother just a few minutes ago.* She couldn't explain why the anxiety spiked abruptly in her chest, but if she kept her eyes away, she could control it. Neither of the others noted Lana's distress as Lois protested, "Barb! Don't be like that!" Her voice lost its scolding appeal, becoming shrill and thin. Her hands wrung in front of her body, and she shuffled nearer to Lana. "You don't owe us anything, okay? I shouldn't have asked. It was silly. I didn't mean anything by it." Her throat flexed as she swallowed. "Just… I mean, you can tell us if you want, but—it's not our business." Brown eyes darted over Lana once. *She really wants to know.* But Lois didn't press any further, staring down at the porch, flicking a bit of dust off of it with her shoe.

Lana crossed her arms. She kept her gaze fixed on Lois's big toe where it tapped on the stone underfoot. "No, um…" She shook her head. Her raw lower lip stung where she had bitten it too much in her uncertainty, in her hesitance. "Barb's not wrong. She expected a question, or more than one, but they both remained silent. *I've got the stage.* She didn't know if she liked it or not; she didn't dare lift her gaze to see their judgment. Instead, her eyelids pinched closed, more
comfortable there in her own personal darkness. "You can't tell her. It's stupid. I'm rebounding. I haven't had to go without loving someone—without having some kind of partner—since I was a kid. I met Victor when I was eighteen, and then Wendy, and..." Her throat closed up, and her eyes stung with tears. With her hand, she covered her mouth, pinched the tip of her nose until she knew she could control it. "I've never been alone before. It's not real. It can't be."

Lois violated the silence in one tender question. "Does it feel real?" She lifted her palm to press to Lana's shoulder, delicate but warm through the thin fabric of the habit, supportive so Lana wished to curl up in her embrace and hug her tight. She couldn't, of course, not outside the house, not with children on the street and parents shooting them wary glances. "Lana..." It does. It feels so real, it hurts. It hurts that I could love someone else so much when I still love Wendy as much as I ever did. "If it feels real, I—I think you should trust yourself. You can't hate yourself for feeling something. Mary Eunice is sweet, and she's kind, and she's special, and she's cute. Not that you want a relationship with her, or even that you should, but—if you care about her, that way, you ought to go with it. You shouldn't fight it."

"No—No, I can't." Lana shook her head in denial. She shrugged Lois's hand off of her shoulder; she grimaced at the hurt look Lois shot her in return, and she crossed her arms with a quiet huff. "It doesn't matter how I feel. She is untouchable. She's been off the market as long as I have." Her hands and feet refused to cease fidgeting and twitching against her will, no matter how she wished them to still. She curled her toes in her shoes.

To her surprise, Barb approached; Lana's eyes widened. She peeled the mask off of her face. "Ugh. It's hard to breathe in there." She folded it in her hands, toying with the plastic. "It does matter how you feel, you know." She didn't meet Lana's gaze. The rubber mask stretched and gave way under her fingers. "Lois is right. Mary Eunice is really great. It would take a crazy person not to fall in love with her eventually, and I don't even know her that well. You live with her. You sleep beside her every night. You can't do that with a person and not think they're special." Licking her chapped lips, she finally turned her head. Lana refused to meet her gaze, staring at her forehead instead. "You think it feels real. What does that feel like to you?"

It feels like the sun rises in her hair, and the noon sky lies in her eyes. It feels like her skin is the sand beside the ocean. It feels like her teeth are the pearls. It feels like her lips are the water, but they don't taste salty—they taste like her vanilla chapstick. It feels like the peace right before a light rain. Lana didn't trust Barb and Lois to understand any of that, nor did she want to admit to some of it; she couldn't give them access to any of Mary Eunice's secrets, not without her permission. Dabbing away a single tear with her index finger, she instead said, "If someone told me I could have Wendy back and Mary Eunice could take her place, I'm not certain which I would choose."

A low whistle rose from Barb's throat. "You got it bad, girl. You got it real bad. They say people fall in love, but I think you just dived off of that skyscraper downtown."

Lois shot her a withering look, and she fell silent. In a thin, nervous voice, Lois posed a suggestion; however, something else offset her gentleness, some emotion buried just below the surface, teasing Lana with its nearness. She's hiding something. "Have you thought about telling Mary Eunice how you feel?"

"Absolutely not!" Straightening her back, Lana cast an authoritarian look over the both of them. "I can't tell her anything. It would scare her. It's been hard enough for her, having to lose so much of what she believes for me. She trusts me as her friend, and I won't do anything to change that."

"Do you really think Mary Eunice is like that?" Tears sheened over Lois's eyes, desperation resting in those depths, though Lana struggled to take her seriously behind the Minnie Mouse mask. "She's been nothing but good to you, to all of us. You know what she's done to try and
protect you better than we do. I don't think you need to worry about her being less than kind.”

"She’s done more than she should've done for me. I won't impose on her more than I already have."

Barb said, "We took her to a gay bar, and she didn't condemn anyone or burst into flames. I think she would be fine."

Cringing, Lana shook her head. "No, that's just—that's another thing. After what Rachel did to her…” She squeezed her hands together so tight, the knuckles bleached white. "There's no way."

"Mary Eunice knows you would never do anything like that. She knows you wouldn't hurt her. I told you, she thinks the world of you—she thinks you make the sun rise every morning, thinks the stars are in your eyes—"

"I said no!" Lana snapped. The tremble returned to her fingers; it rose from somewhere in her bones, a vibration, and the sinking sensation quivered in her lower gut. Her chest tightened. Don't do this right now. She sucked in a deep breath through her nose and released it, long and slow. She tensed and then relaxed her muscles. "You can't tell her. I don't want her to know." Lois's eyes fell, but they both nodded mutely. "It's better this way, alright?" She scanned each of them, Barb unfolding the rubbery mask and slipping it back over her head. "Promise you won't tell her."

They each hummed a vague agreement, and a brief silence consumed them. The breeze rattled the dead tree, and the dry leaves scuttled across the pavement, though most of them had disintegrated for the autumn, branches of all the neighborhood trees barren. A few more groups of trick-or-treaters meandered up the street, turning to head up the walk to each house, and by the time Mary Eunice returned with the lawn chairs looped over her arms and mud stuck to her pretty heels, the first brave bunch approached.

Mary Eunice brightened. "Look at these little trailblazers!" She beamed. The children were all older, and they didn't have any adult supervision—probably the reason they'd come to door at all. "We've got a ghost, a vampire, Superman, Wonder Woman, and… who are you?"

The bright-eyed girl proudly puffed up, tossing back her ginger pigtails. "I'm Jenny. My mom says I should be true to myself no matter what."

The other adults giggled—even Lois, who detested children, muffled her laughter behind her hand—but Mary Eunice flashed a simple smile and nodded in serious agreement. "That's some very good advice. Your mom must be a very smart woman." Lana distributed a handful of candy into each of their bags, perhaps a little more generously than she should have. It's not like many other kids are going to turn up. Might as well give them extra.

The ghost, a black boy disguising his skin color under the sheet with two eye-holes cut in it, asked, "Miss, are you Jane Fonda?"

Mary Eunice's face froze in the smile, and she turned back to glance at Lana, confusion lighting her eyes; to her relief, the vampire said, "Don't be silly! She's clearly Marilyn Monroe!" Jenny and Superman offered their thanks while the others squibbled, one asking, "Marilyn who?" and another insisting, "She's Brigitte Bardot!" and another saying, "Nuh-uh, the hair isn't right at all."

As they passed from earshot, Lois huffed, eyes narrowed. "I like the vampire one. The rest are silly. Jane Fonda—she looks nothing like Jane Fonda—"

"Who is Jane Fonda?" Mary Eunice asked.

"She's not Marilyn Monroe, that's who she is!" Everyone gave a burst of laughter at Lois's
frustration, and as Barb settled a hand on her arm, she relaxed, shrugging off the touch as the next bunch turned from the sidewalk to approach Lana's house.

The faces came and went; as the minutes wore on, more and more people gained the courage to swing from the street and gather their candy and well-wishes from the ragtag bunch. A mother came with four children attached to her on a string of baling twine, all tied at the belt; they cried, "Trick or treat!" and Barb dropped a couple bits of candy into each of their bags. But, before they turned away, the woman hesitated. "Miss Winters?"

*Oh no.* Lana's eyes widened. The voice wasn't confrontational, but she'd learned better than to trust the people around her; Mary Eunice flanked her, smile vanishing from her face, as Barb's cold eyes set upon her. She lifted her hands, exposing her palms in innocence. Her throat visibly flexed. She said, "I—I just wanted to say I think you're a real hero." The last word sent ease trickling through the group. Mary Eunice relaxed. Barb's hard gaze softened. "I know the community hasn't been kind to you. It's easier for those who didn't lose anyone, but—" She closed her eyes and forced a smile onto her mouth. *I know what that feels like.* Lana was no stranger to pressing a smile onto her lips and watching as the world purchased it and passed it along without any heed. "I want my kids to grow up and be like you. Someone who will make a change for the better, no matter what anybody else has to say about it."

The bundle of nerves in the pit of Lana's stomach settled, much to her surprise. "I—um, thank you." She couldn't remember feeling so speechless before in her life.

"Thank you." The woman tugged her baling twine and herded her children away, back down the sidewalk.

"Has anybody ever said anything like that before?" Lois asked.

Lana shook her head. "Never."

"They should," Barb said.

More kids streamed at them, some young enough to fit in strollers, some far too old to wear those costumes and gather the candy; none of the adults said anything, until a familiar face dragged along two children with a frizzy-haired woman on her arm. The suit cinched in Jasmine's front, blocking her chest. A tie tucked down into her suit coat, she escorted the children, herding them down the sidewalk, and at her feet, they cheered, "Dad, dad, dad!" in a million different demands and requests and questions.

The women all ogled, lips parted, staring at their friend—at this new version of her. Lana had never seen her like this before. *I don't even know what name to call her.* Lois cleared her throat. "Nick!" *Is that it?* Jasmine nodded, glancing at the others, panic filtering into her eyes.

Lana bumped Mary Eunice at the elbow, nudged her into action. "It's good to see you, Nick." The name tasted bad on the tip of her tongue. "Are you guys having a good night?"

"Course we are, Miz Winters. The white neighborhood has been good to us. I got a tip-off on which houses to avoid." She cleared her throat as Mary Eunice dropped a large handful of candy into each child's bag, giving animated speech to them. "This is my wife, April—April, these are my friends I told you about. And these are my children, Aaliyah and Jayden."

"It's nice to meet you all," April said.

The little girl, Aaliyah, peeked up at Mary Eunice from behind a thick curtain of curls. "You're so pretty..." she said, awe in her voice and in her large round eyes. Mary Eunice thanked her quietly,
but the awestruck hands caught onto the front of her dress. "I wanna be pretty just like you when I grow up."

April stepped forward, an apology already on her lips, but Mary Eunice didn't shoo the child away from her. "You're already beautiful, just the way you are," she reassured the girl. "You don't want to be pretty like me. You want to be pretty like you. You're always the most beautiful when you love yourself. And don't ever let anyone tell you different."

Wow. Lana watched, impressed into silence, as the girl threw her arms around Mary Eunice's waist and Mary Eunice hugged her in turn. But no amount of support kept April from apologizing as Aaliyah returned to her side; Mary Eunice tried to reassure her, but she didn't listen, rushing both kids back down the steps. Jasmine cleared her throat. "I'll see you folks later. C'mon, guys. More houses to hit up. We're losing sunlight."

As their silhouettes headed down the street, Barb whispered, "Was it just me, or was that really weird? Seeing—Seeing Jasmine like that, I mean." They all nodded in a silent agreement. "It's just unnatural. Where was the dress? Where was the makeup? She hadn't even shaved all the way…" Barb scratched at her chin, pinching it, and she swallowed hard. "She has a point, though. What time is it? Seems like we've been out here for awhile."

Lois peeked back into the house at the wall clock. "It's seven-thirty," she said. "Looks like we'll have plenty of extra candy, at any rate. More for us, right?" She poured the two bowls into one.

"So, Sister, you really like kids?" Barb asked.

Mary Eunice shrugged, but she rubbed the back of her neck in discomfort. "I—Not really," she admitted after a moment's hesitance. "No, I don't like children. No more than adults, anyway." She licked her lips. "But I would never mistreat a child because I don't like them. I think they're people, not commodities. And I think a lot of adults tend to forget that—what it was like to be a child."

Barb nodded, slow and considerate. As the twilight settled over the neighborhood, she peeled off her mask. "God, I hate that thing. I feel all itchy. Breathing in my own breath all night. Sweating on myself, too." She scoffed. "And for what? Nobody even showed up. I was worried about reporters turning up and throwing us on the front page of the newspaper or something, and instead we just got a bunch of leftover candy." She paused for a moment. "Man, I really am itchy." She scratched at the side of her face with her fingernails until Lois went to her aid. "No, no, I'm fine. It's just itchy. It's just itchy, really." Beneath the porchlight, she rubbed her eyes with her balled fists, trying to dodge Lois's combing fingers where they worked across her swollen, hot skin. "I've got sweat running into my eyes. Do you know how bad your own breath begins to taste and smell after you inhale it for ninety minutes? I feel like I need to brush my teeth or something."

"No, Barb, hold still. You're getting a rash. It's cropping up on your cheeks. You must have an allergy to some kind of rubber, something in that mask. Stop touching it." Lois swatted it away from her and passed it off to Lana, who grimaced at the sticky texture. It feels too real. Her stomach flipped. Mary Eunice took it from her. Blue eyes fixed on her under the dim light. She didn't say anything, didn't even mouth the words, but Lana could hear her voice in her head asking, Are you okay? "C'mon, you're coming inside. I need to look at this under the bathroom light and put some cream on it." Lois took Barb by the arm and dragged her to the door. "We'll be back in a few minutes. Don't get any awesome trick-or-treaters without us, okay?"

They vanished into the house. In their wake, they left silence. No more bodies prowled under the streetlights; almost all of the children had retreated back into the safety of their homes, leaving the street deserted. Other neighbors killed their outside light and returned inside. But Lana sank back to sit in one of the lawn chairs, and Mary Eunice perched beside her. Lana reached over the arm
of the chair to brush her fingertips against the back of Mary Eunice's hand. She offered her palm in turn, and their fingers clasped loosely, folded fingers into valleys. *Holding her hand is easy,* Lana acknowledged; it didn't evoke fear from her, didn't make her scan the street for any watchers, didn't send her crawling back into the shadows where they could cradle one another in privacy, safe from the judgment of others. "I'm alright," she said.

Her reflection gazed back at her in Mary Eunice's crystalline eyes, deep as the ocean; not for the first time, her writer's brain compared those eyes to a pond flecked with algae, somewhere peaceful and quiet and distant from all difficult realities of her life. *Maybe Barb and Lois are right. Maybe I should tell her.* Lana's tongue darted out across her lips, hesitant and dry, and she couldn't maintain eye contact any longer. Concern furrowed on Mary Eunice's brow as Lana began to withdraw her hand. She didn't resist. Instead, she asked in her low, croaking voice, "Are you sure?"

*No. I can't.* As selfish as it was, Lana wouldn't risk losing Mary Eunice, not even to tell her the truth. Not even if it meant lying to her. "It's hard," she said, easing into another subject in her own mind. Mary Eunice didn't notice the difference—or, if she did, she didn't confront Lana over it. "Doing these things without her. Holidays." She grated her teeth against the budding lump in her throat. Mentioning Wendy revived all of her insecurities about these new feelings she harbored toward Mary Eunice. Was it disloyal? *No. Wendy would want me to be happy.* She couldn't shake the prospect of infidelity, no matter how she knew Wendy's spirit, whatever plane she occupied, would not want Lana to suffer over the uncontrollable feelings which boiled every time Mary Eunice touched her. "And this is just Halloween." She picked at the arm of her chair with absent fingernails, peeling the paint off of the plastic. "Thanksgiving is coming—then Christmas." She drummed the toes of her shoes on the stone of the porch in a few low clicking noises. "We always did those things together. Just us. Since everybody else headed home to their families, it was always just—just me and her. It's hard to imagine doing those things without her."

Sorrow filled Mary Eunice's face, just as real and true as it shivered inside Lana's stomach; she could have sworn, looking into those melancholy eyes, Mary Eunice had known and grieved Wendy the same as anyone else who had loved her in her life. "I'm sorry, Lana." She offered her hand, and Lana took it. *Indulge yourself. You've earned it. You've earned these good feelings.* "I—I know it is little comfort for you, and I'm sorry. But I'm going to be here for both of those things, and for as long as you want." Mary Eunice cleared her throat; it was hoarse from the overuse of her voice, speaking to the kids all night. "I know I can't replace Wendy—I don't want to. She was everything I can't be, and more, and I would do anything…" She drifted off into silence as Lana shook her head, squeezing the tips of the pale fingers tightly.

"You are enough." The words arose with more conviction than Lana expected, and her eyes widened at the seriousness of her tone, but she didn't amend it; she meant it in the full, strict tone. "You—just the way you are. I don't compare the two of you. It's like apples and oranges." *Exactly like apples and oranges, except I can't eat the apple, and the orange is rotten.* "Me loving Wendy doesn't mean I love you any less for it. You know more about love than anyone. Does God put a limit on the number of people He can love?"

"Of course not." A wrinkle formed between Mary Eunice's eyes in her forehead as she considered the analogy; Lana knew immediately it was a mistake to make a theological reference. *Trust the nun to overthink any reference to God, Jesus, angels, or other forms of holiness.* She bit her lower lip, waiting for some question she doubted she would be able to answer. But a smile eased the perplexed frown, all of her features relaxing, losing the tension carried deep in her face. The corners of her eyes crinkled with her genuine expression. "I finally got you to admit it." Lana arched an eyebrow at her in return. Mary Eunice grinned. Her eyebrows wiggled with the suggestion. "You're God." She winked playfully.
Lana rolled her eyes skyward. "Oh, for the love of—"

"You?"

"Shut up!"

"Is that the eleventh commandment?"

Lana swatted her. Mary Eunice giggled, the sweet, musical sound which Lana cherished in her soul, the one which made her heart flounder with joy, which made her feet dance to the rhythm stirred by her own heart. She leaned over in the lawn chair to drag her fingers across Mary Eunice's abdomen. The tickling elicited the familiar whoop of laughter; Mary Eunice doubled-over at the waist, her whole face drawn back in joy. The urge to tackle her, to pin her to the floor and make her beg for mercy, rose in Lana's chest—she adored the proximity it granted her, their tickle fights, how close she could get without explanation and how much Mary Eunice would laugh, more liberated than she looked at any other point in time—but she buried it deep in her chest. She couldn't do it here, outside the house, where others could see; she couldn't do it now, with Barb and Lois just inside, sure to witness something and suspect more afoot.

In a firm grip, Mary Eunice's hand caught Lana's. Lana froze. All the joy rushed from her face; her skin drained of color. "What?" Lana asked in a bare whisper.

"I thought I heard something." She rose from the lawn chair; her feet slipped out of the heels, toes white from the cold, and pressed to the porch, creeping on the balls of her feet so her steps made not a sound. "Did you…?" She peeked back at Lana.

A glimmer of fear laid in her blue eyes, but Lana couldn't manage to linger on her face as she shook her head, surveying the street. The bright porch light made everything surrounding darker to her eyes. *We're sitting here like blind ducks.* Lana also stood, shuffling nearer to Mary Eunice. "No," she said. She strained her ears for anything. The crickets sang too loudly in the shrubs; the sweet whistling muffled other sounds. At the skittering of dry leaves on the street, Lana flinched. Her heart shuddered in her chest, springing to life. Her every breath sounded too loudly in her own ears. When she tried to hold it, dizziness spiraled around her. "Maybe we should go inside."

Mary Eunice nodded, but her feet had glued themselves to the porch, refusing to relinquish the grip; if she moved, she feared the ground would collapse into lava. *Don't be silly. It was just something in the bushes. You shouldn't panic.* "Yeah," she echoed. She lifted on dainty foot and turned, turned just a smidge, angled herself slightly at Lana. A twitch of movement in the shrubs made her eyes widen. A question framed Lana's lips into a purse, but before she could utter a word, the world erupted.

In a flurry of dead leaves, two figures sprang from the bushes—two Bloody Faces, each lunging at a woman with outstretched hands. Mary Eunice shrieked. Lana shrank; in her peripheral vision, Mary Eunice watched her shrivel like a dehydrated plant, hands flying up to shield her face. One of the men seized Lana by the veil of the habit. He dragged her by the hair. "No!" Mary Eunice grabbed Lana around the waist and hauled her back. The veil and coif slipped free. Another hand closed around Mary Eunice's arm. She sank her teeth into it. Inside the house, Gus howled and snarled, helpless to protect them—safety lay just out of reach for the two.

The man recoiled. Mary Eunice spat his blood. At the other approaching predator, she hurled the bucket of Halloween candy. Lana had frozen like a tiny, white ice sculpture, immobile and petrified; like Lot's wife overlooking the burning city, she had become a pillar of salt. Mary Eunice ripped the door open and shoved Lana through it, slamming and locking it in her wake. "Lana—" She didn't recognize the twisted texture of her own voice, so raw, angry and frightened, caught in all of the memories of Bloody Face—*It can't be; he's dead!* She grappled for Lana, but
her hands found no grip. Her tunnel vision had stolen everything from her, leaving her disoriented. Every shadow leapt for her. She screamed again when Gus pounced at her feet, seeking to comfort her, to guard her. Where is Lana?

Barb charged at her. Mary Eunice didn't see from which direction she had come, couldn't see anything beyond her own gray haze of terror. "What happened?" Barb demanded; her voice expanded into a shriek, a snarl. "What happened? What's out there?" Hands fastened on Mary Eunice's waist and shook her. "Talk to me!"

"Buh-Buh-Buh—" Mary Eunice's tripping tongue refused to craft the words. Tears stung her cheeks. She shivered from head to toe. It can't be. It can't be Bloody Face. Where is Lana? She yearned for Lana, needed her. Somewhere in the gray, Lois's voice rose, words indiscernible. I think I'm going to puke. She covered her mouth with her hand and wiped her tears with a quivering gasp. "Bloody Face!" Barb and Lois exchanged a skeptical look. "Don't—Don't—" Neither of them heeded Mary Eunice's warning as they spun to charge out the front door, Gus alongside them, closing it behind them. It rattled in the frame. The silence lingered in their absence.

Broken gasps for breath violated the wary peace. Mary Eunice followed the sound, the sobs, the pants, the cries, with only one thought teeming through her mind, repeating itself, a mantra, a rallying cry: Lana, Lana, Lana. The name drove her every step down the hallway. Lana, Lana, Lana. Love muddled with the confusion in her head, the terror in her heart, the swirling of her gut. Lana, Lana, Lana. In the bedroom, she spied the crumpled figure pressed all the way in the back corner between the chest of drawers and the wall. Her hair hung in rank tangles around her face, the black habit crinkled beneath her. She tremored from head to toe. She choked on each shaking breath. Her hands covered her face, whatever weak protection she thought they could offer. "Lana?" Mary Eunice's voice was foreign to her own ears, something raw and gnarled; Lana didn't indicate she had heard. "Lana?" she repeated, tiptoeing nearer across the shag carpet.

Gently, she eased herself to sit beside Lana. A wet stain discolored the front of her habit. The stench of urine rose from her body, pale and frail. "Lana," Mary Eunice repeated, forcing herself to ease the tone of her voice. Still, Lana didn't respond, immersed in her shaking, her gasping, her terror. Mary Eunice extended a hand to rest on her shoulder.

Lana howled in response to the gentle touch, recoiling like a kicked dog. She slapped Mary Eunice's hand away. "Duh-Don't tuh-touch—" Her mangled words held so much heat, so much hatred. She's confused. She doesn't know where she is. "Please," Lana begged. Her red-streaked face crumpled. Nothing could muffle her desperate gasps for breath; her complexion grew whiter under the dim lights. Each breath whistled on its exit and choked on the following entrance. Glazed eyes saw nothing, focused on nothing, so caught in the memory or the fantasy. Desperation swelled up in Mary Eunice's stomach. I don't know what to do. Her hands fluttered in the air around Lana's body, but she didn't dare touch her again, not after the way she'd reacted the first time. "Lana," she said, louder, shakier, a plea she didn't know how to craft. "Lana, it's me—please—" Her eyes swam with tears, making her vision fuzzy and pixelated. I don't know how to help you. "Can you hear me?" Lana didn't respond. Mary Eunice leaned her head against the wall, her whole face screwing up as she tried to think of another way to reach Lana in her hysteria. Gus licks her face. That always helps. Bracing herself for blowback, Mary Eunice extended a hand and pressed it to Lana's cheek.

She shrieked again, coiling up and tossing her arms over her head to try and defend herself. Pain ripped up from Mary Eunice's stomach all the way to her chest, anguish at causing Lana's terror. She wanted to withdraw. Is this the right thing? "Lana!" She shifted closer, pinning Lana back in the corner. Lana thrashed. "Stop it—Lana, stop! You're going to hurt yourself!" Looping her other
arm around Lana's shoulders, she pressed her body against Lana's, enduring the shuddering of limbs. Tears poured down her face. "Lana—Lana, please—" The heaving body gradually ceased its large, hurled movements, but the tremors refused to abate, and the fast-paced breaths whistled in and out of her lungs all the same. "Lana, it's me." She shifted to press against Lana's chest, the other hand wiping the sweat, snot, and tears from her face. "It's me."

Her eyes glistened with something, something akin to recognition but not fully coherent, like some part of her still laid far out of reach of her logical mind. "Suh-Suh-Suh—" Her tongue stumbled over its attempt to form a word, and she shook her head in denial, opening and closing her mouth. She gulped at the air, swallowed it, and hiccups accompanied her sobs and her tremors and her cries for relief. One hand closed around Mary Eunice's wrist and tightened so hard, she feared bruises would crop up in its wake. But she didn't dare sever, not when Lana clung to her through her shivering, weeping panic. Lana's other hand pressed to her own chest. Her eyes stretched wide as saucers, her gaze flicking left and right and up and down and focusing on nothing at all, even when her beautiful, deep brown eyes dared to linger. "Sun—"

Only with this word did Mary Eunice realize Lana's intention behind the weak stammers. "Yes—yes, sunshine, sunshine's here!" She stroked Lana's hot cheek with her thumb, drawing patterns there under the pad. "I love you so much, Lana, I do. Just listen to my voice, alright? Just listen to me. I love you, I don't want you to be afraid." Lana continued to grunt and whimper, unable to form words. "It's okay. It's okay now." Is it? Are those men actually harmless? Did they hurt Barb and Lois? Should I be calling the police? Mary Eunice didn't have any answers. She only knew she wanted to, needed to provide comfort to Lana. "I won't let anyone hurt you, I promise. I swear it, as long as I live, nobody will harm you." How are you going to keep that promise? she asked herself, chewing on her lower lip. Any way I must, she answered internally. She would do anything to protect Lana—she already had in more ways than she could number. "I'm going to protect you." Her voice shook, and she loathed herself for it. I am so weak. I am powerless. I am nothing compared to you. All of her insecurities swamped her mind and her chest like water flowing into her lungs and stifling them. "Lana, it's okay, just—just take a deep breath—"

The advice failed as Lana choked on her breath and began to cough. She shook her head, drool stringing out of her mouth. Mary Eunice wiped it away with her hand. Her own tears fell faster, but she refused to give in. I don't know what else to do! Lana lifted the wrist she gripped so tightly and placed the palm of that hand on her other cheek. Her body quaked with such force, she almost lost control of her arms entirely. Mary Eunice took the encouragement and shifted closer, drawing herself up right in front of Lana; she pecked a kiss onto her forehead. "Yes, cupcake, I know." She couldn't smell the urine stench clinging to Lana anymore for the blockage in her own nose. "I know you're scared—I'm scared, too." I'm more scared of this, of you becoming this way, than I am of any punk teenager in a mask. The helplessness and desperation swarmed her lower belly, and she didn't say those words. Instead, she leaned forward and rested her forehead against Lana's, eyes closed. "Please, Lana…" Mary Eunice couldn't stop saying the name. How sweetly it rolled off of her tongue, how many prayers lay in those two syllables, how much faith she held in the way her lips framed the name like lullaby. She drew comfort from Lana's very name. "Try to think of something else, think of—of Gus, at the park, with the rabbit! And how good it smelled…" I could smell you. We were close enough so I could smell your perfume.

Lana managed to frame a protest. "I cuh-cuh-cuh—" Mary Eunice understood without her finishing the word: I can't. Her sweaty palm opened and closed, tightened and loosened, where it gripped Mary Eunice's upper arm. Her eyes wouldn't still from their flicking. She yelped, this time not under Mary Eunice's hand; her expression glazed with pain. "Muh-My cuh-chuh—"

"Your chest?" Mary Eunice asked. "Does it hurt?" Lana nodded and dragged herself into Mary Eunice's lap; Mary Eunice received her with open arms, but when she tried to cinch them around
Lana's middle, smooth them up and down her back, Lana grunted a protest. *I don't know what to do,* her inside wailed. *I don't know what to do to help you. I don't know how to fix it!* She stroked a hand over Lana's tangled, sweat-soaked hair. Her jaw trembled so hard, she bit her tongue. She retracted it and licked the roof of her mouth, swallowing the blood. *Dear God, please bring Lana peace.* She closed her eyes tight. Without her vision, Lana became more real, squirming, alive, sweating, panting, hot from head to toe, cradled against Mary Eunice's body like a hungry infant. *Please ease her suffering. Please make the path she walks easier than the ones she's navigated in the past. Please give her strength.* "Lana, I—I don't know what to do, I don't know how I can help you." *Please guide me in being her friend. Please don't punish her because my heart has strayed from its righteous path.* Lana's quivering, wet face pressed into the crook of Mary Eunice's neck. "I…" She sucked in a deep breath through her mouth and released it just as slowly. Memory tingled in her mind, and she grabbed for a quote—something she knew, now, did not bring any comfort to Lana, but it brought comfort to her. Lana didn't believe, and she had good reason not to, but none of that could change Mary Eunice's mind. "Thus saith the Lord that created thee, and the Lord that formed thee, fear not, for I have redeemed thee—" Her voice broke. She choked on a sob. "I have called thee by thy name." *Lana, Lana, a beautiful name.* Mary Eunice fought to remain steady and intelligible in her words; she had already betrayed all of her emotion. "Thou—Thou art mine." *She isn't mine. But I wish she was.*

Shifting, Mary Eunice positioned Lana differently beside her. Lana's breathing refused to calm, even with the influence, and those claw-like hands became vices wherever they fixed to Mary Eunice's body. Lana's tongue continued to trip over its buffering syllables, all clumsy and heaving inside her mouth. The floor boomed underfoot. Gus barreled down the hall ahead of the summoning voices. "Lana? Sister?" called Barb and Lois intermittently. Gus leapt upon Mary Eunice and Lana; Lana cried out when he landed in her lap, and Mary Eunice dragged him back by his collar, admonishing him while Lana reached for Mary Eunice again, the way a blind woman grappled for her cane, the way a drowning victim strained for a raft.

Lois found them first. "Barb! They're in here!" Barb appeared beside her, face cast into shadow. She glanced once at them before she whispered something to Lois, out of Mary Eunice's earshot, and turned on her heel to head back up the hall. Lois tiptoed across the carpet. At some point, she had discarded her Minnie Mouse mask, and her red hair hung in clumps over her gray costume. Her shadow fell across Lana's body. Lana whimpered and cringed, a dog bracing itself for a kick; Lois froze, and then she sank down, sitting across from them on the floor, not close enough to disturb Lana from where her panicked body heaved and shed sheets of sweat. "It was just a couple teenagers," she said, voice low and eyes dark with seriousness. "Gus got one of them—the one who stole your, uh, your—"

She made a gesture with her hand over her hair, and Mary Eunice provided, "Veil," as she stroked the back of Lana's hand, the only part of her body which didn't stiffen and rebuke Mary Eunice's touch. *My habit is the last thing I'm worried about right now.* She didn't say the words. She appreciated that Barb and Lois had recovered it, anyway; she couldn't imagine trying to explain this story to Father Joseph or to the Monsignor. "Yes, I let Lana wear my habit as a Halloween costume," would certainly earn her a punishment, if not a dismissal from her position. Her stomach quivered with fear at the prospect.

"Yeah. That," Lois agreed, dim, eyes averted. "They won't be back." Her eyes darted back to Lana. Pearly teeth nibbled on her lower lip, hesitant as she regarded Lana; she glanced to Mary Eunice, uncertain, afraid. One hand extended to pat Mary Eunice's knee. The small, tender gesture sent another tear sliding down Mary Eunice's cheek. "I can call the police if you want. Barb and I will talk to them." *I don't know.* Helpless, Mary Eunice glanced to the side of Lana's face, but Lana either couldn't hear or couldn't respond. Mary Eunice shook her head. *No one can see her like this. We don't need anymore attention.* Lois's gaze followed Mary Eunice's concerned look at Lana, though she didn't stare or impose herself. "Barb went to get her Valium from the car. It
Lana doesn't want to use drugs. Mary Eunice's face crumpled. She couldn't do this. She couldn't keep choosing between her loyalty to Lana and her urge to protect Lana's well-being. Her head bobbed in a broken nod. "Thank you," she managed, a bare whisper. She wiped away her tears with the back of one hand; Lana had removed a vice-like hand to press against her own shuddering chest. "Lana," she said. "Lana, your chest hurts because of how you're breathing —" She knows that, you're just telling her things she knows, it isn't her fault she can't control it! Mary Eunice gulped the hard knot in her throat. The hateful inner voice, the one which sounded so similar to the evil she had banished from her soul, never failed to rise at her most vulnerable points. "Try to slow down. There's no one here to hurt you. Try to take a deep breath."

Lana sucked at the air like a too-thick milkshake through the straw. She inhaled her own stringing, thick saliva and coughed. Her flushed, patchy face grew more irritated and red. "That's okay, that's okay," Mary Eunice said in her soft, low voice. "Try again." She did, and this time she only hiccuped. "Good." Mary Eunice wiped away the snot from Lana's nose and tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. She's getting control of herself again. But her attacks had never struck so forcefully before, had never lasted so long. This one set a bad precedent. "Do it again, with me."

Barb entered the room with her face drawn up tight, a rash blistered across both cheeks. She clutched a bottle of pills in her left hand and unscrewed the cap. "Give her one of these." They spoke in soft whispers, like if they kept their voices low enough, Lana wouldn't hear, though she sat right in front of them. Mary Eunice opened her palm and took a single tablet, which she dropped into Lana's mouth. Lana sputtered in surprise, but her throat bobbed as she swallowed. Barb sat down beside Lois. "Give that a few minutes."

The few minutes passed with excruciating lethargy; each second couldn't work up the energy to pass onto the next, each minute taking hours to make the clock tick. But Lana eased with Mary Eunice's quiet encouragement. Her body sagged, head resting against Mary Eunice's shoulder. Her clothes had soaked to the skin with her sweat; her hair hung in wet tangles around her face. The tremors ended in her extremities, her fingers and her lips, but she managed to calm her larger body parts and steady herself. Mary Eunice embraced her, and Lana didn't resist. Instead, she hummed an approving note. Her eyelids fluttered, but she kept her eyes closed, the lashes brushing against Mary Eunice's face. Oh, Lana. She had a thousand things she wanted to say, a thousand admissions of love to proclaim, a thousand regrets to craft, but she remained silent, even as Lana nuzzled against her jaw with lips puckered, nose bumping its way up from her jawbone to her cheek. A grunt rose from her throat. Mary Eunice understood the message well enough. So, in spite of the company and their watchful eyes, she turned her head and pressed a delicate kiss to Lana's lips. Lana leaned into the caress of Mary Eunice's mouth on hers. A desperate sigh flushed from her nose. Her weak arms fastened around Mary Eunice's neck and refused to relinquish their hold. I don't know if she wants Barb and Lois to see this. Mary Eunice swallowed hard. I don't know if I want Barb and Lois to see this. Fear curled in her gut, fear of rebuke, fear of them thinking she wanted to replace Wendy. Wendy would know what to do right now. She prayed for a shred of the gravitas Wendy would have used in this situation, a smattering of guidance, as she slowly severed the kiss and allowed Lana to curl up against her, their foreheads and noses bumping.

Lana drifted back down, a wilted leaf withering up in the sun, but she kept her arms looped around Mary Eunice. Mary Eunice didn't retreat from her embrace. She lifted her eyes to Barb and Lois where they observed, the former ogling, the latter with tears glimmering in her golden-brown eyes. She swallowed hard as she made eye contact with Barb, expecting a rebuke, an outcry, some protest from the intimacy she and Lana had shared. But as she met Barb's eyes, Barb merely shook her head; she accepted the silence as she scooted nearer. "Lana," she addressed quietly, and
Lana's thick eyelashes fluttered, tired eyes widening when she focused on Barb and Lois in front of her. She didn't look surprised, but rather enlightened, like their presence had made her reach an epiphany. "How do you feel?" Barb asked.

"Drained," Lana croaked in response. _Oh, Lana._ Mary Eunice's heart broke at the uttered word. _I wish her burden could be mine instead. I wish I could take it all myself and let her be free._ Lana allowed her eyes to drift shut again, resting her head on Mary Eunice's shoulder as she hummed a soft note. "I'm sorry you had to see that." Her breath teased Mary Eunice's cheek and chin. Goosebumps erupted in its wake.

Lois frowned. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Sweetie, you don't have to apologize to us. We're your friends. We want to support you. We want to take care of you." Lana gave another noncommittal grunt, like she lacked the energy to do anything else, to provide a real answer or even to thank them for staying. _She needs to rest. I'll get her some clean pajamas and put her to bed._ Gus slithered forward, and this time, Mary Eunice didn't bat him away; Lana teased his ears with her free hand, straining her face away from where his tongue fought to reach. "Lana, sweetheart..." A single tear fell from Lois's eye. She wiped it away on her knuckle. "You can't live like this. You know that, right?"

"Like what?" In a disinterested voice, Lana asked the words, her eyes closing. The eyelashes brushed Mary Eunice's neck. _She's tired. Don't do this to her now. Don't make her talk about it now._ Mary Eunice bit her tongue. She knew Lois and Barb had better standing than she did, more to offer the discussion. Maybe things would look up, now. Maybe Lana would decide to get the help she needed.

"In fear. You can't live so nervous, and tense, and on edge. It's not healthy."

"I'm fine." _No, Lana, you're not. You're not fine._

Lois didn't relent. "You need help, Lana. Real, professional help." Lana set her jaw with an audible click, and Lois's features tightened in response, her eyes pinching at the corners and lips quirking downward. Her nostrils flared in a subtle exhale. She wiped at the corners of her eyes with her knuckles, and she shook her head. "Don't. Lana, don't look that way. Listen to me. You need to see a doctor. This, this isn't good. You're going to wind up hurting yourself, or—or giving yourself a heart attack, or—"

"I'm fine," Lana repeated. She lifted her brown eyes from Mary Eunice's shoulder, glittering with something dark and hard as diamonds—hatred and fear, revulsion at the suggestion, incredulity that Lois would dare to suggest it so openly. "I don't need the help of any _shrink._ Doctors have done enough to get me into this mess." Lois opened her mouth to argue, but as Lana's mouth twisted down into a snarl, her protest died on her lips. "What do you know, anyway? You sweep hair for a living!"

Lois recoiled at the sharp words, and Barb interjected with a harsh, "Hey!" She said it like one would dissuade an aggressive dog from misbehaving. "Don't talk to her that way! She wants to help you, which is better than you can say for yourself!" Lana hissed. Her hand twisted up in Mary Eunice's and squeezed tight. The sweat of their palms mingled and lingered in the warmth of two moist skins. _She wants me to support her._ Mary Eunice's eyes stung at the realization. How could she choose between her two loyalties to Lana—the one to preserve her mental health and the other to preserve their friendship, their shared trust? Barb's gaze fell to where their hands caught before it lifted back to Lana's face. "And, for your information, I'm a nurse, and I agree with her. You need help. I don't know what bug crawled up your ass, but your problems aren't Lois's fault!"

Lois offered a cautioning word to her girlfriend. Barb softened a little, but her eyes held the
hardness of offense. I know what that feels like, Mary Eunice thought. She had felt those emotions in her belly and chest whenever she defended Lana from her many assailants. If anyone spoke to Lana that way, Mary Eunice wouldn't have liked it, not at all. Worry troubled her lips. Barb's frustration was justifiable. She squeezed Lana's hand in spite of the knowledge; Lana needed the solidarity and the unity. In a quieter voice, Barb said, "There's no shame in getting help. I don't know if someone told you so, or if you decided it on your own, but… No one is going to judge you for taking some medication so you don't have another panic attack, or for seeing a therapist once a week to talk about what you're feeling. Nobody will even know except the people you want to know. It'll be perfectly safe!"

Lana's face screwed up like she tasted something bitter. "No." Eyes narrow, she tightened her vice-like grip on Mary Eunice's hand. "Tell them," she said, nudging her, prompting her. Mary Eunice swallowed a dry budding lump in her throat. I can't. I don't know what to say. Her big eyes landed on Lois and then flicked to Barb, both of them expectant. "Sunshine." A pleading note dragged onto the end of Lana's tired voice. "Sunshine, tell them I'm alright. I don't need anything—I'm fine. I've got you."

Tears poured into her eyes and filled them to the brim. You've got me, but I'm not enough. I'm not enough to help you, to save you, to make you better. Her words choked in her throat; a sob threatened to rip from her if she made a sound. "Lana, I…" All three of them fixed eyes on her. "I love you, I do." More than anything else in the whole world. More than I've ever loved anyone. More than I love God. The blasphemous but honest thought gnarled her guts. "And I think—I think you need help." Hot tears raced in streams down her cheeks. Lana stiffened like Mary Eunice had jabbed her with a cattle prod. Her hand retreated. Mary Eunice's grappled in the empty air, burning and aching and yearning in its absence. "I'll be anything you need me to be—do anything—but this is getting worse! I don't know how to help you! I'm not enough!"

Lana ripped away as Mary Eunice's sobbed words died into a mumbled trickle. Lana, I'm sorry. She couldn't manage the apology, no matter how much she wanted to utter, no matter how she wanted to beg forgiveness like she would if she had sinned against God. For all of Mary Eunice's teasing and jokes, Lana was not God. Mary Eunice couldn't repent and clear the air between them anew once more. Shaky, Lana rose to her feet, rubbery knees and ankles threatening to dump her back onto the carpet. "I can't believe you." Her voice cracked. She stormed past them into the bathroom and slammed the door shut with such force, it rocked in the door frame. The lock gave an audible click.

I messed up. Mary Eunice buried her face in her hands to muffle her next sob, to restrain it, to keep it silent. I messed up, I messed up so bad. Lana would never trust her again. Lana would never love her again. Lana would kick her out. Where could she go? She hadn't the first clue, not even who she could call, which direction she could walk. "Oh, sweetie..." Lois sighed the words as Mary Eunice crumbled like a collapsing bridge, dropping bricks and beams into the river of tears below. She crawled to sit beside Mary Eunice, opposite the side Lana had previously occupied. "Mary Eunice, baby, it's okay." Lois offered a hug, which Mary Eunice spied through her parted fingers. She slithered into the embrace, loathing herself for it. I don't deserve this. I betrayed Lana. I don't deserve anything. Why did I do that? "It's okay," Lois repeated in a low, comforting hum.

To her surprise, Barb eased beside her as well, smoothing an arm over the flat of her back. "C'mon, kid," she murmured. "Lana's a stubborn old mule. She needs to hear it." Lois's lips pressed to one hot, wet cheek with a soft smacking noise. The sound grounded Mary Eunice in the moment. She sank back to earth, weighed by the sheer reality on her shoulders. "You see a lot more than we do. She's gonna think your opinion means more than ours. You'll see. We'll gang up on her if we have to. Throw her in a straightjacket and haul her ass out to psychiatric ward of the hospital." Mary Eunice cringed. A straightjacket? Lana had already known Briarcliff. She didn't
I wouldn't do that do he if I wanted to.

She swallowed the hard lump in her throat and managed to say, in a thin voice, "I—I don't think that's a good idea..." Anywhere she couldn't be with Lana was not a good place. Lana would definitely never forgive them if they signed her into another mental institution, even a benevolent one. Face cracking, her lips quivered. Knock it off! You're embarrassing yourself! She couldn't control her inconsolable tears. "I just want Lana to be okay," she whimpered, everything crumbling.

Lois reached into her hair to unspin her hair from the intricate pattern she'd crafted. "We know, sweetheart. We want that, too." She tugged each tiny braid free. The fruity perfume which clung to her body, uniquely Lois in all of its femininity, melted on Mary Eunice's tongue. She buried her face in the crook of Lois's neck. You're so stupid. This is humiliating. You're weak. You can't even make Lana feel better. Lois planted another kiss on the top of her head. "Barb, help me untie these braids," she whispered, and then she had two pairs of hands in her hair, one slightly rougher than the other but neither causing any pain as they tugged the knots out and let her long hair fall free.

The comfort wreathed around her until she could breathe steadily once again, but Lana still didn't emerge from the bathroom. Through the wall, the shower came on. Barb interrupted Mary Eunice's dark, twisting thoughts where they roamed through her mind like creeping shadows cast upon the floor. "Are you going to tell us what that kiss was about, or are we going to have to guess to ourselves?" Her question was probing, not demanding, but it still triggered a fire low in Mary Eunice's belly. I can't say the wrong thing now.

"Barb, don't..." Lois shook her head, trying to dissuade her. "You don't have to tell us anything. We know you and Lana have something... special." The corners of her lips flexed slightly, and Mary Eunice grimaced at the awkward expression. They're going to make the wrong assumptions. It isn't like that, it's not—maybe I wish it was, but... Pleading, she met Lois's eyes, uncertain how to even begin her explanation. How could she explain something she and Lana hadn't defined for themselves? "There's nothing wrong with it," Lois assured her.

Mary Eunice averted her eyes. "I know," she said. Barb blinked once, lifting her head, taken aback by the revelation. "She—She asked me. She wanted it.

"We saw that," Barb said. A quirked wrinkle appeared between her eyebrows, concerned and curious. "I just want to know why." She offered a hand to Mary Eunice, which she accepted, cold and trembling fingers folding into Barb's large, warm grasp. Barb's hands were roughened like hers with callouses on the palms and cracked bits of skin on the knuckles. "Lana likes you a lot, you know." I know. I messed up. I messed up real bad. Mary Eunice's gaze floated back down to the carpet, but she didn't miss the warning glance Lois shot Barb, something like a warning. Maybe I shouldn't have told Lois how I feel... Her tongue flicked across her bottom teeth. Barb's eyes darted back. "Do you want to talk about it?"

This wasn't the harsh, raunchy version of Barb Mary Eunice had met all those weeks ago, cowering away from an intimidating woman who dared to be so very vulgar, forthright, and masculine while retaining all of a woman's beauty. Or perhaps it was still the Barb she had first known, now softened to a member of the in-group rather than walling against a potential threat to the friends she had to defend. Regardless, Mary Eunice appreciated the shift in her character, the friendliness and muted affection now offered to her. "There—There isn't much to talk about," she said as the pad of Barb's thumb caressed the back of her hand. "After that night, at the bar, we've just been—I dunno, doing that."

A slight smirk teased Barb's lips, eyes glowing with reassurance. "The word is kissing, sugar," she provided. A hot blush raced up Mary Eunice's neck. I know the word. At the provision, she
reconsidered it. She'd been kissing Lana. When phrased in such a manner, it sounded romantic, intimate, close, forged by bonds she and Lana could never share. *It's not like that. It's kissing, but it's not kissing like that.* "What about the bar changed all this for you, then?"

Lois kept shooting Barb dark, leery looks as she combed her hand through Mary Eunice's long hair, smoothing it down and fiddling with it to calm herself. She leaned into the embrace. "Um…" She didn't know how much Lana might have told them, what Lana had planned on remaining a secret. "After—After Rachel left, that night, Lana and I went to bed…” She drifted off, plucking her bottom lip between her teeth as she recalled the night, all of its heat and its chill. "And she asked me if she could kiss me, and I told her she could." _She left hickeys on my neck. I liked the way her teeth felt on my skin. I still think of the way her lips took my pulse every night._ "And, I guess…” Mary Eunice wrung her hands. "I guess we just never really stopped." _I told her I liked being hers, and we decided sharing kisses was nice._ She gulped back a hiccup of fear. "It's not—It's not like that," she assured. "We're just friends." _Wendy is the only one for her, and God is the only one for me._

"Of course you are." Lois gave her a sympathetic smile. She squeezed Mary Eunice's hand. "You take really good care of Lana, you know. You're everything to her." Now, Barb shot her a look. What is up with them? Lois ignored her. "She thinks the world of you." _People keep telling me that, but I don't know what it means._ She sucked on her bottom lip until she tasted the metallic flavor of raw skin and blood there from her teeth raking over the fragile skin too many times. But with the two of them caressing her in different ways, Mary Eunice's qualms all soothed in some way or another, no matter how she feared the blowback from Lana, from her overhasty decision to speak. "Do you want to come with us tonight?" Lois offered. "Give Lana tonight to calm down. We'll bring you back tomorrow on our way to work. You can have your own bed for a change." A warm smile touched her pink lips, but Mary Eunice couldn't linger on them for too long.

She cast a long gaze at the bathroom door. The sound of pounding water from the shower still beat through the walls. Would Lana want her to be here? She didn't know. She didn't want to stay if Lana wanted her to leave. _But I can't leave her alone if she needs me. She might need me. She might want me._ The slimmest possibility, the pounding of love within her heart—more love than she could reveal to Barb, love which Lois knew and which Mary Eunice trusted her to keep secret—made her shake her head. "No, I—I better not." She cleared her throat from the thick hoarseness which had gathered there. _Lana might need me. I don't want her to think I'm upset, or hurt…"_ She dabbed away a tear from her cheek with her knuckle, grimacing where it rolled down her face. Stop crying. You don't need to cry all the time. You're weak.

"You are upset." Barb gave her a pointed look with the words. "Lana deserves to know how you feel—the truth. She loves you a lot. She values your feelings." _She just ran away because I told her what I thought, the truth._ Mary Eunice averted her eyes, withdrawing her hands and folding her knuckles into one another. Her fingers didn't fit together with one another like they fitted with Lana's. Her knuckles didn't become a series of rough mountain ranges, capable of weathering any storm. There were gaps where her hands touched one another. "Right now, she's hurt, and she's stubborn, but she cares about you. Don't forget that." _Why should Lana love me? Why should anyone?_ A finger brushed her cheek and lifted her chin so she met Barb's eyes. The touch interrupted her self-deprecating thoughts. "Okay?"

She gulped. Barb was right. She couldn't keep doubting herself; it was an insult to Lana. Lana loved her, even if she saw no reason for anyone to ever care about her. She had a friend for the first time in her life. She couldn't afford to push Lana away. "Okay," she agreed, bobbing her head. Wiping another tear away, she added, "Thank you."

Lois tugged her to her feet. "Don't thank us, baby. We're here for you and for Lana. We want what's best for both of you." She took Barb's hand. Mary Eunice scanned them once, the way
they held one another, and she recalled the story Lois had told her, the origin of this relationship. They fit together so well, two parts of a well-oiled machine. An unidentified emotion prickled in her gut, hot and green where it arose. Lois reached out and squeezed her hand tight. "Call us if you need anything, alright?" She nodded in agreement again. "Tell Lana we love her."

"I will."

Lois dragged her into another tight embrace, Barb providing a solid wall at her shoulder. "We love you." Tears stung behind her eyelids at the quiet utterance. Is this what it means to have friends? The sheer affection of the moment overwhelmed her, everything bleeding from the other bodies into hers. She pinched her eyes and mouth shut tight to keep from crying out at the weight lifting off of her shoulders, distributed onto the other two cherished bodies beside her. "Take care, alright?" Lois retreated just a bit to tuck a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. Mary Eunice nodded. "Good girl."

In the silence of their absence, everything crushed her once again. Gravity shrunk her lungs so she fought to inhale with each passing second. Through the wall, the sound of the shower died. Is she going to come out? Mary Eunice didn't want to rush her. Fear clouded her stomach and her eyes. She tiptoed backward to sit on the edge of the bed. I can't ambush her. I need to wait for her to come to me. What if she wants me to leave? Where will I go? She pinched her forearm, plucking off all of the old scabs and creating new bleeding wounds. God, please sate Lana's heart, and please guide my words. Purify me and allow me to be a better friend to her and a better servant to You. Please, grant me some wisdom.

The bathroom door clicked open. Mary Eunice lifted her head from where her gaze had focused on her bloodied arm and stained fingertips. Lana emerged wrapped in a towel tucked around her body. At her appearance, Mary Eunice averted her eyes once again. Should I say something? I should apologize. No, I said I would wait. I should wait. She bit her lower lip, picking at the skin on her arm again. Lana strode across the room. Behind Mary Eunice, out of sight, the towel dropped to the floor, and Lana jerked up a drawer on the chest. She's naked right now. Lana had never done that before, not so openly; Mary Eunice needed only to turn her head to see Lana's bare body in a way she had never known but craved. She trusts you. Don't mess it up. She didn't move a muscle while she listened to the fabric whistle around Lana, clothing herself.

Clad in a set of flannel pajamas, Lana passed her again, heading back into the bathroom. She gathered her dirty clothes into her arms. Mary Eunice perked up, and she settled her feet into the shag carpet, following Lana up the hall. "You don't have to—I can do that."

Lana flipped open the lid to the washing machine and dropped the dirty clothes into it. As she poured the detergent into it, the stench of urine disappeared. "I'm not going to make you wash my piss clothes," Lana growled. Mary Eunice cringed at the harsh tone to her voice. She slammed the lid shut so hard, it echoed through the house, and Gus whimpered, retreating from where he had followed them back to the bedroom. Lana set her jaw as Mary Eunice hovered, afraid to move, uncertain what to say. "What do you want?"

At the snapped words, Mary Eunice took a tiny step back, casting her gaze down to her toes. I need to leave her alone. She doesn't want me here. I need to leave her alone. Her mouth dried, no matter how she tried to wet it with her tongue. She bit the inside of her cheek. "I'm sorry." Her voice emerged in a hoarse mutter. The tears stung at her again; she thought she had controlled them, but they reemerged with a vengeance. "I didn't mean it."

"Yes, you did." Lana glared at the lid of the washing machine. Her hands pinched at the edges so tightly, her knuckles turned white.

Lips trembling, Mary Eunice buffered, seeking some solution. Softer, she whispered, "Yeah, I
did." Her bloody fingernails dug into forearm. "I—I love you, Lana." Tears raced down her cheeks. She hated herself for it, for the weakness. "I'm so scared of losing you. When you get like that—I just want you to be okay." Lana didn't look at her. The silence stretched long between them. Mary Eunice shifted her weight from foot to foot, fidgeting and uncomfortable. *I messed everything up.* "I'm worried about you."

Curt and short, Lana said, "I know." Mary Eunice winced. Lana had never sounded so uncaring before. She had lost all of her tenderness. Exhaustion crinkled at the corners of her eyes. Lana had become empty, a shell of the loving woman Mary Eunice knew. Mary Eunice eased nearer and caressed the back of one tense hand. Lana stiffened and jerked her body away. *Don't touch me.* She turned her back, crossing her arms tight across her chest, hunching at the shoulders. Her body shuddered with a long breath. As she exhaled, palpable melancholy attached to her breath. Softer, she amended, "I don't want to be touched right now."

Mary Eunice tucked her hands under her arms to ensure she kept them pinned, safe from touching Lana unwarranted again. "I'm sorry, I…" *I didn't know.* She licked her lips. Barb had told her to tell the truth. But how could she, when Lana was so small and vulnerable? "I love you," she whispered again. Lana didn't return the words of affection. "Won't you—Can't you please—your doctor, or someone—anyone?" Her garbled words didn't make a complete thought. No answer rose from Lana's turned back. "Lana, please..." Tearful in her imploring, Mary Eunice tiptoed around Lana to face her; her expression had tightened, eyes screwed shut. *She's in pain. This is hurting her.* "You can get better. Someone can help you. You don't have to live like this! You don't need to be like this!"

"Yes, I do!" Lana ripped her arms from around her body and tossed them into the air, hands balled into sharp fists. Mary Eunice's eyes fluttered wide. She jumped back, out of range of contact, heart bursting into her throat and threatening to land on her tongue. "I'm like this because I deserve it! Okay? I'm fucking broken!" The walls shook with Lana's shouts, each one making Mary Eunice shrink more. "I fucked up my whole life! I fucked up! I got Wendy killed, I almost died more times than I can fucking name—I deserve whatever I've got to fucking endure!"

*Lana, it's not true. It's not. Let me tell you it's not true.* Mary Eunice couldn't bring herself to speak. She couldn't bring herself to look at Lana. The loud voice rooted her to the spot, hands in front of her face, spine bent, ready to crumble and protect herself the only way she knew how if an unfriendly hand made contact. The silence ended with an audible sniffle and whimper from her throat. *I can't say anything.* She didn't dare open her eyes. Her open palms shielded her face from impact.

Soft fingertips brushed her palm, almost like tickling. She flinched. But as she peeked one eye open, Lana wore all of her grief and guilt at the surface of her eyes and grimace. She guided Mary Eunice's hands down away from her face, dropped her protective shield, with delicate guidance by her fingers. Somewhere in her twisted an expression, an apology lay, but Lana didn't manage to say it aloud. As Mary Eunice hiccuped on another disturbed, frightened sob, Lana retreated, covering her mouth and nose with her hands. "Go take a shower," she said, mumbling the words into her palms, eyes anywhere but Mary Eunice's face.

She shivered from head to toe. Robotic and stiff, save for the shuddering in her muscles and digits, she rotated on the balls of her feet and walked away, knees nearly refusing to bend; they locked up in resistance, wanting to keep her rooted to the spot, but she marched away like a soldier ordered by her captain. She closed the bathroom door all the way. She didn't leave the crack of light peeking into the bedroom, the openness they used to hear one another even on the calmest of nights for fear of something surfacing. In the mirror, her own face astonished her, the makeup rolling off of it, the trademark mole of Marilyn Monroe's left cheek sliding down her chin. Her hair had become wavy from all the braids. *I look awful.* She sniffled and wiped her nose with the
Lois's beautiful ivory dress pooled around her feet, and the shower came on, the hot water already spent. She huddled far back in the shower stall, hiding her body from the frigid stream until she could resist it no longer. The chill pebbled her nipples and sent goosebumps reeling from her head to her toes, all over her arms and legs and chest and abdomen. The blood on her hand and arm washed away. The makeup faded. And when she emerged from the shower, the image in the mirror reflected her face as she recognized it—bare, blue lips shivering, tears in her eyes in spite of all the ones she'd already shed. She sucked in a deep breath and exhaled it to calm the erratic throbbing of her own heart. The ruddy patches on her cheeks vanished bit by bit.

On her toes, Mary Eunice emerged from the bathroom. Lana lay on the bed on her side, curled up with her back to Mary Eunice. Her side rose and fell evenly. She's asleep. Gus rested beside Lana, both brown eyes fixed on Mary Eunice. Creeping around the room, Mary Eunice found her favorite fleece nightgown, and she combed her hair in silence. She's resting. That's a blessing. She bit her lower lip. I can't sleep beside her. She wouldn't like that. She's already upset. Mary Eunice cast a long gaze at where Lana slept on the bed, the curves of her beautiful body. She longed to run her hands over Lana's skin and press her love into each inch of freckled skin. I wish she could love herself as much as I love her. Her heart wrenched at the notion. God, please, I know I've asked it before, but… Lana deserves better than what I can give her. Ease her soul. Help make her whole again. Help her see she isn't broken.

Drawing nearer, Mary Eunice peered down at Lana's face, as peaceful as Mary Eunice had ever seen her but still troubled in sleep. "I love you," she whispered to the silence. Reaching down, she tucked a lock of brunette hair behind her ear. The air around her hand warmed as Lana exhaled; the steam collected on her cold palm. A pathetic smile worked its way up to Mary Eunice's lips, and she sniffled around a few more tears. Then, she gathered up the covers and tucked them up over Lana's shoulders. "Sweet dreams, cupcake." You shouldn't. You shouldn't indulge yourself. The discouraging voice didn't stop her from leaning over and pressing a moist kiss to Lana's temple. Standing up straight, she reached past Lana, taking her pillow by the hem. I'll sleep on the couch. She won't be mad about that. As she withdrew, Lana's hand closed around her wrist. Oh no. Mary Eunice's mouth dried. Her every muscle tensed. Stupid stupid stupid. Lana's voice was tiny where it rose to her. "Where are you going?"

"I…" Mary Eunice choked. "I—I was just going to go, um, sleep on the couch, since you were—since you…” She didn't know how to finish the sentence, so she trailed off, letting the awkward silence hang over her head for a moment. Lana lifted her head from the pillow, both brown eyes fixing on her as the soft hand released her arm. It snapped back against her body with her pillow clutched tight. "I'm sorry—I thought you were asleep, I didn't mean—"

"It's fine. Don't—Don't go. Please, stay." Those big brown eyes, vulnerabilities apparent in their depths, floated up to her face, all round like the moon. "Please." The last word was softer than the others, a genuine plea which Mary Eunice couldn't have denied if she had wanted to. On the balls of her feet, she crept around the bed and placed her pillow in the spot from where she had grabbed it. Then, she tucked herself in under the covers; she left a modest distance between herself and Lana, afraid of violating her boundaries again, afraid of earning another rebuke. She didn't lie down, and after she lingered there in silence with her eyes downcast, Lana pushed herself up into a sitting position. She grimaced and pressed a hand to her temple, massaging it. Mary Eunice's gaze darted to her, but she refused to let it settle there.

Lana extended a hand to her, brushing fingers along the back of her hand, which she opened at the gentle prompting. "Sunshine, I—I'm sorry." Lana's voice cracked. Sunshine. Mary Eunice's
heart warmed at the term of endearment. "I shouldn't have shouted at you. I'm not angry—you didn't do anything wrong, I swear. You're..." Her lips and chin shivered. Tears formed a sheen over those deep brown eyes. *No, Lana, don't start crying again. You've already cried too much for one night.* "You're more than I deserve." Mary Eunice curled her fingers in with Lana's, focusing on the way each of their digits fit into the valley of another. She squeezed the hand in her grasp. *It isn't true. You deserve more than I could ever provide.* "And I have no right to raise my voice at you, ever—and don't you dare tell me it's okay, because it's not."

Mary Eunice released a puff of humored breath at the admonition. Lana scooted closer to her on the mattress, and she met her in the middle, violating the neutral zone in the middle of the bed and leaving gaps on the edges where any monster might've lurked to grab them. "You always know what I'm going to say." In spite of the light intentions behind her words, her voice was a croak from all of the tears she'd shed, the ones which had poured from the cruel pranksters, the ones which had poured into Lois and Barb, the ones which had broken into trickles from Lana's rebuke.

Nestling close to her, Lana leaned her shoulder against Mary Eunice's. Mary Eunice looped an arm around her neck. They each hummed with satisfaction, pleased at the arrangement. "Not always," Lana replied. She brushed her cheek up against Mary Eunice's, nose and eyelashes teasing her skin. Mary Eunice turned her head, thinking Lana meant to request a kiss. Instead, she found her eyes locking with Lana's. Less than five inches separated their faces. "Do you..." She drifted off in hesitation. "Do you really think I should—should I do what they said?"

Mary Eunice nodded. Lana's big eyes didn't leave hers; the agreement wasn't explanation enough. She cleared her throat. "I think... I think it would help." She curled her toes under the blankets in discomfort. "Even if you don't want to go actually talk to someone—your doctor could give you some of that medicine, right? And then you won't be so—you won't have to worry about breaking down again, or whatever that is." Her heart refused to settle. What if Lana freaked out again? *I just want her to be okay again.*

Lana didn't rebuke her, though her eyes averted, a weak smile coming to her face and not reaching her eyes genuinely. "Yeah," she echoed in a dull voice. She squeezed Mary Eunice's hand once. Her eyes fluttered closed, and after she shook her head, she managed to say, "I guess I'll do it, then." Mary Eunice lifted her other hand to caress Lana's warm cheek. *Lana, that's wonderful.* She bit her tongue. *You're so wonderful, so strong, so powerful.* Lana continued toying with her hand, absentminded in her actions. "Thank you."

"What have I done?"

Those dark eyes flicked open to meet hers once again. "You've done everything." *What does that mean?* Mary Eunice didn't have the chance to ask the question. Lana leaned forward and pressed a delicate kiss to her lips, intoxicating enough to make her head spin. "You're so cold. Your hands..." She rolled one hand between two of hers. "Your lips. Do you need me to warm you up?" A hot pink blush rose to Mary Eunice's face. "You're so cute."

Lana's lips captured hers again, this time not as delicate, hotter, wetter, and then Lana peppered her neck with tiny wet smooches; by the time she had finished, Mary Eunice was warm from head to toe, her face and arms red with a delightful, adolescent brand of embarrassment. "Lana?"

"Hm?"

"What is—What is this?" Lana's brow quirked. "Barb just—she asked me, and I didn't really know what to tell her—nothing sounded right..."

"Do you not like it?"
"No!" The vehemence in her voice took them both aback, and she stammered to amend her single harsh word. "I—I mean, I love it, I think it's great, or fine, it's—I like it."

A dark chuckle rose from Lana's throat. She pressed a warm, flush kiss to one pink cheek. "If you like it," Lana murmured to her ear, "do we really have to give it a name?"

She shrugged. "I guess not." Lana eased into the pillows, and Mary Eunice followed. She offered her arm, and Lana rested her head on her chest. Mary Eunice teased her long, dark hair with her hand, smoothing over her shoulder and side. *It doesn't need a name. I love Lana, and she loves me, and it isn't wrong for us to be friends who love each other. "So you'll call the doctor tomorrow?"* she probed.

"Yes. Lana glanced up at her. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "For—everything."

Mary Eunice gave her a weak grin. "You know I think you can do no wrong."

A wry snort of laughter came from Lana's chest. "Yeah. I know." She hummed a long sigh. "I love you, sunshine."

Mary Eunice planted a kiss on top of her head. "I love you, too, cupcake."

"Is that my new name now?"

"If you like it."

"I love it."

Eased at long last, Mary Eunice kept Lana enveloped safe and protected in her arms, smoothing her hands over her body to rub all of the tension out of her spine and head. The exhaustion of the panic attack made Lana drop off to sleep fairly quickly, but even when her hot breath puffed steadily across Mary Eunice's chin, Mary Eunice couldn't convince herself to sleep. She adored the warmth of Lana's soft body against hers too much. For the first time that day, she prayed her rosary, murmuring the words and fingering the imaginary beads on Lana's hand—each finger representing two of the Hail Marys in every decade, one part of every mystery. *I could count my prayers like this for the rest of my life. Her tongue darted across her lips while she shoved away the ramifications of those thoughts. She loved Lana more than anything else, more than she was meant to love anything or anyone, but she had promised herself to God, and she could not go back on that promise. I fought a spiritual battle, but the war isn't over yet. Things aren't the same as before because of me."

Nibbling on her lower lip, she thought on it. Was Lana really a temptation? She had never known anyone more holy. What if this was the plan God had for her? *God knows I'm stupid. He'll make it more clear. He'll guide me. I just need to wait.* Fortunately, Mary Eunice considered herself very patient. Having satisfied herself and her theological worries, she relaxed, and as she tangled one hand into Lana's hair, she found her tired mind easing into sleep with no resistance.
The doctor’s office hummed around Lana where she sat on the edge of a plastic chair. To her right, a little boy coughed and sneezed, big red flush marks over his cheeks as his mother wiped away his snot and cradled him through his pained tears. The stench of illness rose off of him, and Lana resisted the urge to cover her nose and mouth. *I do not want to have the flu for Thanksgiving. Mary Eunice would lose her mind.* To her left, a geriatric couple had come in together, the man cradling his chest and occasionally grunting. “Harold,” his wife said, “Are you sure you don’t want to go to the emergency room? Dr. Dillon is just going to tell you that chest pains are bad and send you there!”

“Let me handle this, Irene!” She fell silent, rolling her eyes at his antics before she covered her face with her hand, pinching her nose and shaking her head. Orange and brown decorative leaves dangled from the walls, and crudely colored turkeys scattered over the children’s table in the corner. Lana kept scanning the room behind her sunglasses and her bonnet, both pressed around her face to hide her identity. The man at her side groaned again, leaning his head back. “God, that feels bad.” He belched. Lana glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, studying his pallid skin tone, the sweat rolling down his temples. *He needs some help.* She swept the waiting room again, seeking some nurse or receptionist, someone whose attention she could catch to aid the man. But as his wife began to worry over him, he growled, “I said leave it alone,” in a dark, threatening voice. *I’m not getting in the middle of that.* Sucking on her lower lip, she woefully maintained her silence.

A nurse emerged from the back hallway. “Winters, Lana?” she called in a none-too-soft voice. *Shit.* All of the heads lifted from where they’d stared at the ground. *I’m like a damned circus animal.* The eyes peered up at her as she stood. The mother of the little boy uttered a tiny gasp of fear and hugged him closer. Lana resisted the urge to glower at her as she passed by; instead, she clutched her purse with a white-knuckled hand and prayed no one had seen her car, lest they decide to vandalize her property given the opportunity. In spite of the glares spitting at her back, the nurse maintained a professional smile which reached her eyes. She held not a shred of enmity against Lana. “It’s good to see you again, Miss Winters.”

“Thanks,” Lana said. *Not really.* “There’s a man over there with chest pains—he looks like he’s having a heart attack.” She nodded in the general direction of the elderly couple, the man still clutching his chest and massaging his left arm and shoulder intermittently.

The nurse’s eyebrows quirked in concern. “I see,” she said. “Second room on the right, if you will, Miss Winters. Dr. Dillon will see you in a few minutes.” Lana followed the instructions, her car keys jangling in the pockets of her skirt. The nurse made a beeline in the opposite direction. Lana entered the examination room and closed the door behind her before she could hear the ensuing drama.

The paper on the rubber bed crinkled as Lana clambered up onto it. Her feet barely touched the
stool below it. She grimaced, wringing her hands in front of her. Nervousness quelled in the pit of her belly. *I need to fidget with something. I need to write.* Opening the buckle of her purse with a snap, Lana dug around inside of it before she located her pen. She tugged it behind her ear and sought her notepad. Her sweaty palms and the slight jitter of her fingers made it hard for her to hold the pen steady. The notepad had fallen all the way to the bottom of her purse. She sorted out her wallet, backup makeup, fingernail clippers, brush, hair bands, and other junk to reach the small notepad. She flipped it open.

Loopy cursive script marred the page. *That isn’t mine.* She squinted at the ink, and after a brief struggle, she donned her reading glasses, bringing the handwriting into full focus. “Lana,” the handwriting read, “I hope everything goes well today. You have all of my prayers.” The corners of Lana’s lips curled up at the edges. She had noticed Mary Eunice praying even more than usual lately. “No matter what happens, I love and support you. Also, we’re out of eggs, butter, milk—” Flour had been crossed out, and in parentheses, the text read, “I found more flour in the cabinet,” before continuing, “marshmallows, brussel sprouts, cream of mushroom soup, and elbow macaroni if you want mac ‘n cheese. Anything else you think someone might want to eat, get the stuff and I’ll cook it.”

Lana shook her head at Mary Eunice’s antics leaking into the note. She almost regretted her decision to invite Barb, Lois, and Earl over for Thanksgiving; Mary Eunice intended to cook until the house fell down. *She’s so sweet.* Her heart warmed at the note, all of Mary Eunice’s harried tendencies leaking into it. She wanted to make Thanksgiving perfect. *Has she ever had a real Thanksgiving dinner before?* she wondered. Lana knew she wouldn’t have had anything of the sort in Briarcliff, but before Briarcliff? The Celest Lana had met wouldn’t have had any plans of creating a Thanksgiving dinner, but Mary Eunice said she hadn’t always been like that. Had the poverty kept them from putting together a holiday? *If this is her first, then she deserves for it to be special.* “Also, for dessert I’m making pumpkin pie, but if you’d like a cake, too, I’ll bake it. I know you like cake.” Lana chuckled at that sentence. “All my love forever, your sunshine.”

Heart light like she’d received a love note, Lana lifted the notepad to her face, cherishing it, inhaling the scent of ink and paper; if she held it close enough, Mary Eunice’s safe essence would wreath around her and protect her from whatever laid in her path. *She called herself sunshine. My sunshine.* Lana swallowed hard. Her mouth wasn’t so dry anymore; the sweat on her hands had dried. The glorified grocery list had soothed her very soul. Was this what Mary Eunice had intended? She didn’t know. A sharp rap of knuckles on the closed door prevented her from considering the notion.

The thick wooden door cracked open before Dr. Dillon entered, thick salt-and-pepper hair slick back flat to his head, clipboard under his arm. Lana’s heart skipped a beat as he closed the door behind him. His shoes squeaked on the hardwood floor. The overhead light flashed on his horn-rimmed glasses. Lana averted her gaze, instead staring at the sheet of paper on the plastic bed, toying with it with her index fingers. “Good morning, doctor,” she greeted in a muted voice. He hummed in response to her. His pen raked across the clipboard, etching something into the paper. Her eyes darted to his brown shoes. *That doesn’t sound promising.*

“Miss Winters,” he said in a mild voice, “it’s good to see you again. Though it has been arguably far too long.” She grimaced. *Must we talk about that?* “I need to check your incision. It should’ve been done weeks ago.” *That is not what I’m here for.* Lana’s hands tightened on the sides of the bed, fingernails digging into the plastic. “Lie back, please.”

Her heart floundered in her throat as she obeyed his demand. At the touch of the cool bed, her sweat leaked through her shirt, pressing it against her skin. She gulped a dry lump in her throat. He plucked the hem of her sweater. The bright overhead light burned her eyes, sucked her elsewhere like a vacuum, and she screwed up her face against it. *Don’t do this. You know where*
you are. Mary Eunice isn’t here to hold your hand and baby you through it. She inhaled through her nose and puffed it between her tightly clamped lips. Gloved hands probed around the sensitive scar across her lower abdomen. Think of Mary Eunice. She fought for the image in her mind, the azure eyes, the white skin with its smattering of pale freckles, the thick locks of golden hair, the comforting low notes of her voice, the neat script on the paper signed, “Your sunshine.” How those arms felt when they cinched around her body—how the scent of heavy rain always clung to her hair and her skin. Fuck, I’m head over heels. Lana curled her toes in her flats, frustrated at the revelation. She couldn’t escape it. She would hate me if she knew.

Dr. Dillon rolled her sweater back down, and she sprang back upward, hands clinging to one another in her lap. The sweat on her palms slickened the space between her fingers, but she resisted the urge to wipe them off. “You’re healing well. You’re lucky you didn’t get an infection.” He cleared his throat and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “Miss Winters,” he said, voice stern but soft. She narrowed her eyes and set her jaw. I’m about to get scolded. Her lip curled at the thought. “I’m not a fool. You are not the first of my patients to sneak around seeking illicit methods of terminating a pregnancy. Nor are you the first to sustain an injury which could have killed you in the process.”

She chewed the inside of her cheek. I’m not a child, she wanted to say. You don’t have to slap my wrist and tell me I did bad. “Are you going to tell the police?”

“Don’t be silly.” He rolled away on his stool to fidget with some things on the counter. “If I called the police on every woman who did what you did, or worse, I’d be out of business.” Her shoulders sank with relief at the revelation. “But I wish you had come to me. There are loopholes through the laws. You could have legally received a therapeutic abortion from the hospital with no skin off of anyone’s back.”

“I’d rather not be the next Sherri Finkbine. We can’t all fly to Sweden.”

Dr. Dillon arched an eyebrow. “Finkbine got herself into trouble by opening her mouth. You’re very good at keeping secrets.” What the hell is that supposed to mean? Lana met his eyes, but he shook his head, clearing his throat. “But it’s all done now. Now, I must advise you—you won’t want to hear it, but as your doctor it’s my responsibility—if you decide to have children, vaginal birth won’t be safe.”

“I really don’t think that’s going to be a problem for me.” This is not why I came here.

“Be that as it may, you always have time to change your mind—”

“I’m a little old to start having kids, aren’t I?” Lana fought to keep the scowl off of her face and out of her voice. “I’m not exactly nineteen anymore.” Does he really think a magical dick is going to come into my life now? Bile rose in the back of Lana’s throat. She could’ve vomited. I’d rather die.

Dr. Dillon held up a hand, palm open. “Your life choices have no bearing on me, Miss Winters. As your physician, I’m telling you to schedule a cesarean if you decide to have children. If not, then it doesn’t affect you.” He lit up the otoscope and peeked into both of her ears, into her eyes, into her mouth. Then he measured her pulse. With a frown, he wrote everything down. “Your pulse is a little high, but I would suppose that’s normal, given why you’re here.” He glanced up at her and pressed a smile upon his lips. He leaned too close. She tilted her back to try and get the scent of his cologne out of her nose. “Otherwise, you’re a pillar of health.” He patted her knee. Don’t touch me, she wanted to request, but she bit down on the tip of her tongue. “Alright, Miss Winters. Tell me why you’re here, if you will. I understand you’re having problems with anxiety?”
You could say that. Lana gulped. Her tongue eased across her lips. It was so much easier with Mary Eunice, so much easier to talk about her problems, to discuss what she saw in her head. “I—yes. I…” She wrung her hands in her lap, staring into her purse. I shouldn’t have come. This is embarrassing. “I was always sort of—sort of nervous, I guess.” Dr. Dillon bobbed his head in agreement. He looked understanding, welcoming, but she couldn’t fix too long on his glasses without his face melting into another, much less friendly expression. “But a few weeks ago, I started having these, uh, these—attacks. I can’t stand up, I can’t breathe, my heart goes out of control, I start sweating.” She paused to swallow again. Flushes of shame rushed to her cheeks, and she fidgeted, hating herself for all of her weakness put on display in front of the man. “I called after Halloween, when a group of—I guess they were teenagers, I didn’t really look at them—they ambushed me and my friend, on the porch, and I…”

She sank backward into the memory, the rubber of those masks becoming real, the tunnel vision shrinking so she only saw the teeth, Wendy’s teeth, glued into them; she felt the hands on her body, heard a comforting voice, but she couldn’t ground herself in reality. Even the friendliest touch became a harsh, bruising punch, a slap from the man who had robbed her of everything—of her life, her lover, her sanity. “I became almost catatonic. I couldn’t shake it off, none of my friends could get me out of it. When I came to, I…um, I had—” God, this fucking sucks. Why did I let Mary Eunice talk me into this? Logically, she knew she had come here because she needed it. But losing her pride stung all of her innards. I don’t want to be this way. I’m not crazy. I shouldn’t need any help. “I’d urinated all over myself,” she whispered, eyes downcast.

Dr. Dillon didn’t interrupt her. He wrote down a few observations, but nothing more. “Have you experienced anything like that since then? Another panic attack?”

“Yes, um—not to that degree, but… Since then, I had another, about ten days ago. I woke up from a dream, screaming, and—even though I was awake, the dream wasn’t over. It was like it followed me.” She bit her lower lip. She had never seen Mary Eunice move so fast than when the first shriek pulled her from her own dreams, how she flicked on the lights and tugged Lana’s hair back from her sweat-slicked face and held her, held her so tight she nearly couldn’t breathe, until the world stopped spinning and the blankets became friends rather than enemies once again. “It took me awhile to shake it off.”

“So this is becoming a regular thing—regular enough to bother you, that is.” Lana nodded in agreement. Dr. Dillon quirked his eyebrows and leaned forward on his rolling stool, removing his glasses. “Miss Winters, I think, from the symptoms you’re describing—it’s my professional opinion that you have what we call post-traumatic stress disorder.”

Lana’s eyes widened with alarm from the long string of unfamiliar words. “No offense, doctor, but what in the hell does that mean?”

He laughed it off, swatting at invisible dust on his pants and shaking his head. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to alarm you,” he said. He fidgeted with his glasses in his hand, wiping them off on the hem of his coat. “It’s not frightening, I promise. It’s just a new term for a very old phenomenon. We first took note of it following the first war. Back then, we called it something else—you might be more familiar with the term shellshock.” Yeah. Lana remained skeptical; her journalist’s ear doubted everything like Descartes. She dug her thumbnail into the strap of her purse to ground herself in the moment, to keep from getting lost inside her own brain. “Isn’t that something for soldiers who experience combat?” She kept her dubious eyes fixed on him, half-expecting him to burst out with laughter and fan her off as crazy, to sweep her under the rug and send her on her way without another consideration.

“Just because you belong to no military does not mean you’ve never fought a war, Miss Winters.” Dr. Dillon met her eyes. “If you’re willing to try it, there is a new medication we’re prescribing for
patients struggling with anxiety. It’s safe and effective. I haven’t had anyone complain about the side effects yet—it seems to help a lot of the people who take it, really.” He gave an encouraging smile. “If you’ll consider—”

“I’ll do it.” Lana didn’t waste time in allowing herself to consider the ramifications of her words. She had come here for help. Mary Eunice trusted her to do this, to accept the help Dr. Dillon offered, whatever it was. “I’ll take it.”

He brightened. The crinkles around his eyes lifted, and he didn’t look so old anymore. Her agreement brought back his youth. “If you have any problems, call. We’re here to help.” She nodded, biting down on the tip of her tongue. Her fisted hands punched the detrimental thoughts from her mind. She had to batter them away. *I am not weak. I need help, but I am not weak.* “I also made your appointment today for a reason, Miss Winters.” She straightened her back at the address. “The counseling center across the street is having its last intake clinic of the year today. It’s advantageous to have them so close. I think it would be good for you to see someone for your ailments. I realize this is difficult for you, and therapy doesn’t have immediate results, but it can aid in day-to-day life. A therapist will help you work through the things you can’t tell anyone else. It’s—It’s sort of like confession, for us secular folks, except your therapist won’t tell you everything you do is a mortal sin.”

Inclining her eyebrows, Lana considered. She knew how miserable Mary Eunice looked after confession, or after a session with Father Joseph, with her eyes always red-rimmed and nose stuffy, but Mary Eunice also insisted it helped, no matter how long she prayed for forgiveness following those encounters. *Mary Eunice wants it for me.* “I suppose.” Her fingernail pierced the strap of her purse, and the rubbery covering dug up under it into the sensitive skin underneath. “It’s worth trying.” *Will I be able to convince myself to open up to a total stranger?* Lana’s only experience with anyone trying to help her mental state had ended in chains with a frozen corpse in a dark, secluded basement; she had learned quite enough of those matters already. She had no reason to trust anyone in the field of psychology. *I’m afraid.* She nibbled on the inside of her lower lip, fearing what she had just agreed to.

“Great!” Dr. Dillon grinned, and he scribbled down a few more illegible notes onto her medical record. “I’ll call in a prescription for you, and you’ll be able to pick it up on your way out of the counseling center—given you have the time right now.” She nodded again. Numbness spread through her lower stomach and chest. Talking to someone? Someone who wasn’t Mary Eunice? *I wish I could have Mary Eunice with me.* It was silly, she knew; she felt like a little girl clinging to her mother’s leg for support, unable to stand without a crutch. “Excellent. I’ll write a recommendation for you to see a therapist over there. Is everything clear?”

“Crystal.” *Clear as a stormcloud.* She bit the tip of her tongue to keep from mumbling the words aloud to him. In silence, she watched as he finished scratching out another set of words on the clipboard.

“I want to see you again in eight weeks to check on you again, alright?” Lana began to bob her head again, but the door of the examination room ripped open, both of them startling; Lana clutched her purse to her chest in reflex.

The harried, wide-eyed nurse fluttered her hands. “Doctor, there’s an emergency—we need help!” Dr. Dillon rose from the stool and scurried after her, abandoning the clipboard on the counter. Lana tiptoed after them.

She followed the sounds of moans and groans sounding from the waiting room. The elderly man had collapsed in the middle of the floor, clutching his chest and rolling left and right, his wife kneeling at his side. “Harold!” she sobbed. To Lana’s left, a nurse rattled off the address and directions to the operator, pleading for an ambulance to come to the doctor’s office immediately.
Coughs rattled out of his chest. He spat up blood. Dr. Dillon knelt beside him with a quirk of fear between his eyebrows; the words he delivered were inaudible, but he kept his tone low and soothing as the fearful woman clutched at her husband’s limp hand. “He’s not breathing!” she shrieked.

A grimace spreading across her face, Lana retreated back, farther away from the scene. On the balls of her feet, she returned to the examination room and took the signed recommendation form from the clipboard without any consideration. No one saw her as she strode past, out the front door. Distantly, sirens blared. Her steps became a skip across the street to the counseling center, building gray and looming. Her stomach wriggled, cold and alive, with all of the emotions she could scarcely consider, let alone identify. *That poor man.* She swallowed hard. Off to the right of the building, she spied a telephone box. Her shoes clicked on the pavement as she skipped to it, flashing a glance over her shoulder at the ambulance barreling down the street before she closed herself into the box, muffling the sound. She replaced her sunglasses and dropped a dime into the slot. Then she spun the dial to call her own house. “C’mon, sunshine,” she urged under her breath. “Pick up.”

“Hullo?” slurred a drunken male voice.

Lana bit back a sigh. Of course, the time she had to pay to make a call, the neighbor answered the phone. “I’m sorry, Mr. Swanson, I’m calling for one of the neighbors.” The line died, and she cursed the world and everyone in it as she fumbled into her purse for another dime. “How much money will I spend trying to get her to answer the damn phone?”

It rang twice, thrice, began the fourth ring before the rings ended. “Um—Eastside 7-7387?” answered Mary Eunice in her timid, alto voice, a slight croak punctuating her words. “This is Sister Mary Eunice.”

“Well, hello, Sister Mary Eunice,” Lana greeted, a smirk spreading across her lips. *She’s so cute.* She drummed her shoes on the floor of the telephone booth. The sound of the other’s breath to her ear eased the fear in her own heart. What couldn’t she face if she knew Mary Eunice waited at home for her, with loving arms? *Is this how she feels about God? Does God make her this strong?* Lana would probably never understand Mary Eunice’s faith entirely, but the more she considered it, the more it made sense.

“Lana?” Mary Eunice’s breathless, chilling voice gave light to her name. She felt newly christened each time Mary Eunice said it. “Are those sirens? Is everything okay? Are you alright?”

She put a hand against the glass of the telephone booth, glancing over her shoulder at the fiasco occurring in the doctor’s office just behind her. “I’m fine,” she reassured. “There’s something going on across the street. Someone’s hurt. It’s not me—don’t worry.” Mary Eunice gulped audibly over the line, breath slightly heavier than before. “I just wanted to let you know Dr. Dillon sent me to the counseling center. I’m going to be home later than I planned.” *I just wanted to hear your voice. You make me feel safer. I needed a little extra strength to make it all the way there.*

“You’re going?”

Lana released a breathy laugh at the doubt in Mary Eunice’s voice. “Yes, I’m going. I promised you I would try, remember?”

“Yes, I—” Mary Eunice hesitated, and Lana waited patiently for her to finish the sentence, but she redirected the subject after a moment’s pause. *What were you going to say? Tell me what you’re thinking.* A somewhat shaky laugh uttered from the other end of the line. “I’m glad. I was worried.” She sighed, a rattle of breath crackling over the line on the phone. “Are you sure you’re okay?”
“I’m fine,” Lana repeated. “I found your grocery list. Do you have anything else you want me to grab while I’m out here?”

“It’s not a grocery list,” Mary Eunice objected. Lana chuckled at her insistence. “It’s not! It’s a love note, with a compilation of things we might need for Thanksgiving dinner attached.” Lana fought to muffle her laugh with the palm of her hand, but she couldn’t restrain it, shaking her head. “What’s so funny?”

You are. You’re cute. “You can call it a grocery list. It won’t hurt my feelings.”

“It is not—”

“Okay, okay, it’s not a grocery list.” Lana hummed with satisfaction as she leaned against the side of the telephone booth. In her mind’s eye, she saw Mary Eunice, her glistening golden hair, her beautiful azure eyes, the slight crookedness to her eyeteeth, the quirk of her pink lips. “You don’t need my permission to ask me for things, you know. Groceries, or anything else. You can give me a grocery list. I’ll buy it, no questions asked.”

“Oh, Lana, I couldn’t do that—it’s not my place.”

I want it to be your place. Lana swallowed those words. The church had, so far, supported their promise to compensate Lana monthly for Mary Eunice’s stay, but each check she received stung; every time she opened another envelope, it reminded her Mary Eunice wasn’t hers. It reminded her Mary Eunice would one day leave, called away to her true position once again. And I’m too old to become a nun. She shoved away all of those negative thoughts before she could linger on them. She did not want to risk any troubles on her mind when she met her new therapist. So, in a light-hearted voice, she teased, “I suppose it would be a bad time to ask you what you want for Christmas, then?” She had already asked the question more than once, each time deflected with the same answer.

The smile reflected in Mary Eunice’s voice. “I already told you, I want peace on earth. I ask for it every year.”

Of course. Lana inclined an eyebrow. “What do you want for Christmas that I have a reasonable chance of getting for you?”

“Lana, please—I don’t want any thing. Being with you is enough.” Lana rolled her eyes, but to her surprise, Mary Eunice continued, “Last Christmas, Sister Jude got me out of bed at three in the morning to help wrestle Spivey into solitary since all of the guards were home for the holiday, and then when Pepper plugged in the Christmas tree, it caught on fire, and we all had to eat in our chambers for the mess in the dayroom, and Sister Jude spent the next three months complaining about the ants.” Lana considered. She could picture everything Mary Eunice described in pristine detail—following orders of wrangling a disorderly patient into solitary, eliminating a fire, eating in solitude with the frigid air whistling in through the cracked window Mary Eunice had described in her chambers. “Believe me, if I make it through the day without someone puking on me, it’ll be the best Christmas I’ve ever had. I don’t need anything from you. I just want to go to mass and pray in peace.”

A smile softened across Lana’s face at the simple request. “Of course.” How could she press Mary Eunice for anything more? I’ll get her something anyway. What would she want? I’ll get her a new Bible, and a rosary or two—maybe three. She could never have enough rosaries. A little book of prayers, a new prayer journal, she’ll like all that. “A day of peaceful prayer it shall be, then.” What else? She considered the habit hanging in the closet, the one with Jude’s name etched on the tag in the back with no explanation. Fabric. I’ll get her some fabric to sew herself a new
habit, all for herself. “You never did answer my question about the groceries. Do you need anything else?”

“Um—not for dinner, no, but Gus is short on dog food, and we’re out of bologna… And did you say Earl likes sweet tea?”

Lana scrambled to write down dog food and bologna. “Yes, he does, but you don’t have to brew any, really—you’re working hard enough—”

“No, it’s already in the pot, but I couldn’t find a recipe in the cookbook. Do you know how much sugar I should put in it?”

“Two cups.”

“Two cups?” Mary Eunice echoed, incredulous. “That’s—that’s one part sugar to four parts water—”

Lana chuckled. “Congratulations, you can do basic math. Earl’s from Alabama and I’m from Georgia. It’d be cheaper if you just poured sugar in hot water and left out the tea bags. Or it’d make no difference to us, anyhow.”

“Goodness, Lana, you’re going to get diabetes. I’m surprised you still have any teeth.”

A happy sigh fluttered from Lana’s tongue. All of the tension from the doctor’s office had left her. She felt rejuvenated, fresh again, and she wished she could carry Mary Eunice’s sweet voice into the counseling center with her. She drew strength from it. “I need to go. I don’t want them to close on me. I’ll get your groceries, okay?”

“Right. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Lana listened to her breathe for a moment more before the line died, and she replaced the phone on the hook. She didn’t steal another glance over her shoulder to look at the fiasco outside the doctor’s office; she needed no more strength to straighten her back and dig her wallet out of her purse, seeking her insurance card. Her shoes clicked on the pavement as she headed down the sidewalk to the front door of the counseling center. She tugged on the handle and strode into the long lobby, which reeked of cigarette smoke. It stretched long ahead of her, the front desk seemingly a dot in the distance. Fate’s tempting me to turn back. Lana lifted her head. She had made a promise to Mary Eunice, and she intended to make well on it.

The thin carpet muffled the sound of her footfalls, heels making only a dull, faint click underfoot with every step. Two harried secretaries slaved over the front desk, one of them speaking to a fat man with disheveled hair and stained sweatpants, whose body odor fanned toward Lana as she approached. She slowed when he glanced at her, but a friendly smile softened his haggard expression. “Hullo, miss,” he said, waving one open-palmed hand. One of the secretaries lifted her head from her paperwork to meet Lana’s gaze, and much like the man, she flashed an all too bright smile, white teeth bared like a growling dog. “Miss Johnson, looks like you got another patient.”

“Why, yes, it does, Jeremy.” The pretty young woman had ringlets of red hair tied back from her face in a neat set of braids. “How can I help you today, miss?”

Lana unfolded the paper she had taken from Dr. Dillon’s examination room. “I have a referral from Dr. Dillon.” The secretary’s soft green eyes held hers, and she adjusted her cute gold-rimmed glasses to take Lana’s referral from her. For a long moment, their gazes didn’t sever in spite of the paper clutched tight in the other woman’s hand. She had a faint dusting of freckles across the
bridge of her nose. The name tag clipped to her blouse dubbed her Maria Johnson.

“Did you just come from there, Miss… Winters? Dr. Dillon’s office, I mean.” Soft green eyes scanned the referral, finding her name on the sheet of paper. As Lana nodded, Maria signed the paperwork with a flourish. Her loopy penmanship hung off of the page, artistic but legible. “Did you happen to see what’s going on, then? No legal trouble, I hope?”

“No.” Lana massaged the back of her left hand to soothe herself. “An old man was having a heart attack. They had just called an ambulance for him as I was leaving.” They’re not calling me out. They’re not treating me differently. Lana’s lips curled up at the corners. She appreciated this quite a bit, the anonymity tied to this place. The reek of tobacco was no deterrent from the friendly atmosphere of the crumbling building.

The secretaries both wiped their brows with relief. The man rocked onto his heels; he wrung his hands. “Well, that’s good.” He spoke with more volume than necessary, and he kept his eyes pinned up to the ceiling, focusing on the ceiling fan where it whirled around and around. “Sometimes we get real crazy folks in here, y’know, miss.” His head followed the circular motions of his eyes. It dizzied Lana, watching him with his loosely flapping, wringing hands. “But you’re not one of them, are you, miss? I don’t think so. I can tell. I can usually tell the crazies from the not-crazies.”

Lana sought Maria’s gaze; the redhead nodded in affirmation to her. She cleared her throat. “No, I—I’m not crazy. Or, at least, I don’t think so.” As the secretary passed the things back to her, she opened her purse and folded them back into it. “Which way is the waiting room?”

“Jeremy can show you, miss. You know the way, don’t you, Jeremy?” asked Maria brightly; she spoke in a soft, condescending tone, like she addressed a child instead of an adult man. “Why don’t you take Miss Winters to the waiting room with you? She’s going to see Shawna Davis. You’ll point out the right person to her, won’t you?” He flapped his hands and head into a jerky nod, hard enough Lana feared he would give himself a concussion. He’s an odd one, alright. Discomfort wriggled inside Lana’s stomach, apprehension, but the man—Jeremy, the secretaries had called him—kept a healthy amount of distance between their two bodies in the open space. So, with the muffled click of her heels, she followed him down the long hall.

“You work for the Boston Globe, don’t you, Miss Winters?” A slight stammer punctuated his voice, drawling out certain syllables and leaving others behind in a lisp. She nodded; her air vanished deep in her chest, anticipating another confrontation. But Jeremy paid no heed to her. “I remember you—your name. I used to cook, you know, what you said to cook, in your—in your column.” His right hand continued to flap low at the air. He had neat, trimmed fingernails. “You really know your way around the kitchen, don’tcha?”

What? Lana’s eyebrows quirked in the middle of her face. “Actually,” she said with a quiet hum, trusting him enough to avert her eyes from his constant flurry of movement, “everyone told me it was tasteless.” Wendy had to get high before she ate anything I made. Lana didn’t mention this facet of her life to him; his recognizing her for the cooking column was noteworthy, but it didn’t give him a free pass. “I can’t enter the kitchen without setting something on fire. My roommate banished me after I nearly burned the house down trying to fry chicken.”

He laughed, too loud, too vociferous for her tastes, with an almost forced texture to it. “You’re funny.” He twisted out his right foot with every other step. “I liked it. My mama says I don’t eat enough of her cooking. But I could always eat your recipes. They weren’t too spicy.” They entered the silent waiting room, but his loud voice didn’t die down. The other patrons lifted their heads to ogle, but he didn’t notice or pay them any heed. “Miss, do you want to play Legos with me?”
She followed his gaze to a table in the back corner of the room set up with little plastic bricks scattered about. *What the hell is this?* “Sure.” Perhaps the company would keep the shadows of her mind at bay; Jeremy was quirky, but he was friendly, and he seemed innocuous enough. *You've proven yourself a great judge of character, Lana,* she cautioned herself, the internal voice sarcastic and snide. But before she had entered Briarcliff, she would have avoided anyone like Jeremy and instead confronted the sanity portrayed in the expression of Dr. Thredson, just as she had learned to dodge Pepper in the day room and hide behind one of the nuns or occupy herself in the kitchen, afraid of the perceived crazy people. True madness disguised itself beyond any comprehension. She trusted Jeremy, at least enough to sit on the floor beside him at the bench of little plastic bricks. “What is this?”

“Legos,” he said again, eyes slanted away from hers; he occupied himself with stacking the bricks at the speed of light, one hand after the other, laying a foundation for something he saw in his mind’s eye but Lana couldn’t comprehend. “I—I like to build things.” His lips pursed in concentration. The jerking of his hands steadied the more he built. “I want to be an engineer,” he said, chewing the inside of his cheek, “but nobody needs engineers these days.” He slid each brick around the other, making the sharp edges of a house, complete with windows. “Want me to show you how to build the roof?”

“Yes.” Jeremy built two sheets of bricks and layered them and slanted them upward toward one another, meeting in the middle. “What’s—What’s the gap for?” she asked, pointing at a gap in the roof he’d created. It occurred to her that he’d asked her play with him, and she had yet to touch a single brick. *I can’t interrupt this.* Somehow, she guessed he didn’t want his space invaded right now.

He brightened. “Oh, that—that’s for the chimney—I can change it if you don’t like it—” He went to remove the roof from where he had snapped it into place.

Lana batted his hands away. “No, no—it’s fine!”

Their fingers brushed in the air between them. He recoiled. His shoulders tensed and drew up under his ears, arms folded across his chest. Lana scrambled backward; her initial, irrational fear said Jeremy intended to strike her and refused to allow her any freedom. “I—I—” His stammer became more punctuated. “I don’t like to be touched.” He framed each word with an exaggerated movement of his mouth.

Loosening her reflexive, tight grip on her purse, Lana leaned forward again, releasing a pent up breath from her parted lips. “Me neither.” She fiddled with the strap of her purse. *Not by men, anyway, and especially not by strangers.* But the sensation of Mary Eunice’s arms around her waist would never fail to warm and ease her heart. The mere thought softened all of her internal workings, so she managed to smile at Jeremy again, if pressed with the expression. “You’re right. It needs a chimney. Santa has to get in somehow.”

Jeremy’s face remained unchanged as he stacked a tube of plastic bricks to build what she assumed would become the chimney. “So you still believe in Santa, then?” he asked, dubiousness in his tone but not upon his face. *Uh…* Lana shrugged, uncertain how to respond; she bit her lower lip in regret of bringing up the childish fantasy. “My mama told me the truth a few years ago. It was because her doctor told her she couldn’t eat sugar anymore, so she couldn’t eat the cookies I baked. I still bake the cookies. Now I just eat them all.” Lana snorted on a chuckle. Jeremy paused in his construction of the chimney. “What’s funny?” He didn’t make direct eye contact with her; his face remained blank. “Was it something I said?”

“You’re very honest,” Lana explained. *But I can’t read you.* She knew how to interpret body language from other people, the slightest crinkles at the eyes or the lips enough to clue her in, especially on the expressive people she knew. *Like Mary Eunice.* Jeremy was different. He wasn’t
crazy—at least, not the sort of crazy she might have expected to find here. But he wasn’t normal, either.

He didn’t answer. After he finished the house, he pulled away, leaving it standing for others to admire. “Miss Johnson said you were going to see Miss Davis. Miss Davis is a therapist here.” He drummed his thighs, and he lowered his voice, though the whisper still projected farther than someone else would’ve appreciated. “I don’t like her very much.” His gaze flitted to Lana’s, but it flicked away before she could see the color of his irises. “My psychiatrist, Dr. Smith, she says Miss Davis worries too much about fixing instead of coping.” Oh, that’s comforting. Lana’s smile froze on her face, cool apprehension lingering there between her teeth. She had far too many problems for anyone to try to fix. Her belly flipped at the prospect. Maybe I shouldn’t be here. She fiddled with the strap of her purse. “Why are you here?”

The question caught her off-guard, and she lifted her gaze from where it had fallen on the flat, dirty carpet. “I, er, I….” She choked on her words. Her toes curled up in her shoes in discomfort. “My friends said I should, and my doctor wrote me a referral, so…” She shrugged, uncertain how to end the hedged sentence with any ease.

Picking at the peeling paint on the edge of the table, Jeremy asked, “Is it because you killed that crazy guy?” in a monotone.

“Er—I guess you could say so.” It’s because I killed the crazy guy, and every moment preceding. A dry lump budded in Lana’s throat, and she loathed it. She needed control, now, before she met her therapist; she didn’t want to walk in looking like a basket case. Sweat slickened both of her palms. She tried to ease the sweat by wiping her hands off on her skirt. The conversation was about to become uncomfortable; the stress collected in her shoulders with such thickness, she could’ve sliced it like cheese.

“Is that why you stopped writing the cooking column?”

The question blindsided Lana. She sputtered for a moment; she had prepared answers for half a dozen different questions, answers about Wendy, answers about Briarcliff, answers about Sister Mary Eunice, answers which would dodge the topic and preserve whatever remained of her pride and privacy. Her breath lost itself somewhere between her mouth and her lungs and swelled there in her throat. He said he liked the cooking column. “My—My editor never asked me to pick up the cooking column again. He felt societal commentary was more profitable for the Globe.” Jeremy’s eyebrows knitted together. Did I use too big of words? No, don’t be silly. He’s not stupid. A quiet, nervous chuckle floated from Lana’s nose, and she inclined her own brows in turn. “He thinks with his wallet, and I’m not in a position to argue. But, to be perfectly honest, the cooking column wasn’t really my thing.”

“My mother said you did the cooking column because you were the only woman on the Globe’s team for advanced journalism.” From his back pocket, Jeremy pulled a small notepad with crumpled pages. “Do you have a pen?” Lana tossed him a pen from her purse. “Thanks.” He drew a straight line down the page of his notebook, crossing the lines for writing with small geometrical shapes. “Why don’t you like cooking?”

“I don’t know. I never got very good at it. I was always too impatient.”

“Did your girlfriend cook for you?” He asked it in the most nonchalant way anyone had ever asked about Wendy. “Before she died, I mean.” His tone had neither lamentation nor accusation.

“Sometimes.” She followed the tip of his pen on the paper with her eyes, dots giving way to boxes and shapes. Once he had filled the page, he paused, and then he set up the first line connecting two dots. “Are you playing dots and boxes?” Alone? With the same color of ink? Lana
and Wendy had passed hours of class time playing dots and boxes in high school, but they had always shared the activity, one of them using ink and the other using lead, so they could count who made the most boxes in all. She couldn’t imagine having any fun playing it alone, nor could she fathom keeping track of who had built which boxes without the different colors.

Jeremy nodded, grunting a hum of agreement. “Helps me pass the time.” The door at the opposite end of the waiting room, and a portly, aging woman emerged; she stood shorter than Lana but twice as wide. “That’s Miss Davis,” Jeremy provided, and he handed the pen back to her. “Thanks for playing with me. Good luck.”

The woman held a clipboard. “Lana?” she called into the empty waiting room. “Lana Winters?” Her full name drew the attention of the other patrons in the waiting room, some of them lifting their heads from their magazines or bibles to watch her cross the room, which she did with her head drawn up and back straight, gaze unwavering from the woman who had called her. A proffered hand greeted her, which she accepted and shook, hoping the firmness of her grip countered the gratuitous sweat coating her palms and fingers. “I’m Shawna Davis.” Sharp perfume clung to her clothing, but tobacco reeked on her breath. “I see you’ve already become acquainted with our dear Jeremy. Poor boy is slower than a freight train leaving the station. He’s one of our hopeless cases.” Hopeless? Disdain pooled in Lana’s belly, which tried to push away in favor of studying her new therapist. “Very well. Follow me.”

The next narrow corridor closed in around Lana. She kept one hand clasped tight around the strap of her purse. Shawna pushed open a heavy, creaky door to give way to a small office marked by a weathered desk and a few chairs settled across from it. The light from the tiny window filtered yellow through the smoke. Lana balanced on the edge of one hard, wooden chair. As soon as she sat, Shawna lit a cigarette and brought it to her lips, pen between her fingers and gaze slanted downward at the clipboard she’d placed on her desk. “Would you like a cigarette, Lana?” The gray smoke floated from between her lips as she spoke.

The acrid flavor of smoke on her tongue curled inside of her, and Lana shook her head, a negation. “I don’t smoke anymore.” The ashtray beside her chair brimmed over with butts and ashes. That needed emptying a week ago. Shawna cleared her throat, and Lana lifted her head from her appraisal of her surroundings. “No, thank you,” she said, a little louder. Is she hard of hearing?

“No, Lana, I heard you.” Shawna flicked the end of her cigarette into the ashtray. She says my name a lot. It was odd, unsettling for Lana. Her hands folded into her lap. “Why don’t you smoke? I use the Benson & Hedges long ones. Really, they’re quite good for you, now that the government is filtering them. They’re a good coping mechanism. You should consider starting again, if you once enjoyed it.”

“I don’t like the taste anymore.” Shawna arched an eyebrow. She is your therapist, Lana reminded herself in a soft, cajoling voice, similar to Mary Eunice’s. Shawna couldn’t benefit her if she didn’t disclose anything about herself. She had come here to talk about her problems and heal, not to clam up and pretend to be okay. Clearing her throat, she added, in a quieter voice, “It reminds me of Briarcliff.”

Another ring of smoke emerged from the other woman’s lips. “Is that so?” Lana nodded. “Well, we’ll see what we can do about that. We’ll handle all of your ailments in good time.” She flicked more butts from her cigarette as she scribbled down a few things on the piece of paper. “Not to sound arrogant, Lana, but Dr. Dillon recommended you to me, specifically, for a reason.” What? Lana hadn’t examined the referral closely, but she hadn’t noticed any particular name on the paper. She narrowed her eyes but remained silent to hear what Shawna had to say. “You aren’t the first woman with this particular problem I’ve seen.” With… anxiety? I’d think it’s not so
uncommon. “Truth be told, I’m reformed myself. I struggled in college, but once I established a career for myself, I was able to settle down. With me, you’ll have a husband and a baby in two, maybe three years.”

Lana choked. She squeezed the wooden arms of the chair with one hand, covering her mouth with the other. “No—No, I’m, uh.” She shook her head, trying to calm all of her racing thoughts; her mind had become a creek, the sandy bottom stirred by a foot plunging into its depths and muddying the clear waters. “This is a misunderstanding; I’m not seeking a husband, or any therapeutic advice on how to woo men.” I’d actually rather die. She forced her hand to loosen its tight grip. “Dr. Dillon said himself it’s none of his business. I need help with my anxiety, and coping mechanisms for—for the flashbacks, and nightmares. That’s all.”

“Lana, you must understand, these surface level problems only culminate as a result of something deeply, internally wrong with the self, which we must seek to repair. Surely you’re aware of this.”

Heart pounding, Lana held Shawna’s gaze; she wouldn’t give in. She couldn’t, not here, not now. I’d actually rather die. She forced her hand to loosen its tight grip. “Dr. Dillon said himself it’s none of his business. I need help with my anxiety, and coping mechanisms for—for the flashbacks, and nightmares. That’s all.”

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“Lana, you must understand, these surface level problems only culminate as a result of something deeply, internally wrong with the self, which we must seek to repair. Surely you’re aware of this.”

“What attempts at correction were tried?” Lana buffered at the blunt question. Shawna arched an eyebrow at her in challenge. “Lana, please, try to focus. We won’t get anywhere if we don’t start on your foundation. You’ll find you gain control of your anxiety when you gain control of yourself as a person, instead of traveling on any whim you like. Now, please, I can only aid you if you’re honest with me. What types of conversion therapy have you attempted in the past?”

“This isn’t what I’m here to talk about.” Shawna’s harsh gaze didn’t waver from her. Lana judged the distance between herself and the door. I’ve got to give her a chance. Isn’t this chance enough? No, no, let her finish. See where she’s going with this. “The head nun of Briarcliff practiced electroshock therapy. When that didn’t work, Dr. Thredson stepped in with his repulsion therapy with ipecac administered intravenously.” A bitter flavor of bile rose in the back of her throat. She fought to swallow it. The mention of the repulsion therapy flashed images in front of her eyes: a frostbitten body with blue lips; the dark blood settling all over chilled limbs with mottled patterns like bruises; the view of bloodless, flapping gums beneath the open mouth; the unyielding chill of kissing a corpse under the instruction of a madman. The taste of decay would never fully leave the underside of her tongue. “Sister Jude didn’t approve of his methods. I’ve no doubt, if he hadn’t taken me, I would’ve been lobotomized.”

Shawna hummed in agreement. Her pen made sweeping curves across the page, taking notes on every word Lana spoke. Why are you writing it down? Lana bit the tip of her tongue, afraid to voice the question in the tense air. “Those were the only methods, then?” Lana froze at her prying question, uncertain how to answer. “Lana, you understand you don’t have to answer any of my questions if you don’t wish to. Perhaps it will impede your progress for now, but I have every faith you will eventually come around.” Shawna inclined her head. “I’m sorry for all the trauma you have endured. But surely you must realize this accumulation of problems never would have occurred if you had not been a practicing homosexual.”

A cold stone settled in the pit of Lana’s stomach. “What do you mean by that?” Her voice had shrunk, become thin and pathetic; she had last heard herself use the tone months ago under the sharp gaze of a man who had bound her to the bed. Her eyes sheened with tears. She fought not to shed them, not to show the weakness threatening to spill from her. “I was happy before everything happened. I know I can’t have that again, but I just want to feel normal—my normal, not yours. I’m here so I might wake up one day without screaming, not so I can wake up one day beside a man.” She shuddered at the prospect. I never want to wake up beside anyone but Mary Eunice. “If
you can’t help me, or won’t, I’ll find someone else.”

The lighter flicked. A tall flame illuminated the room, lit another cigarette, and then died, casting them in the shadows of its brightness once again. “Lana.” Shawna’s voice was stern and firm, like she addressed a naughty child. “You may think you were happy, but if you were, you never would’ve wound up in the asylum in the first place. A healthy brain doesn’t seek out a place like that, even under the guise of research. It’s very simple, really, you must understand that. You are sick, very sick, with an illness we are still working on learning to correct, and your brain cried out for help even when you didn’t—”

“I am not sick.” Lana’s lip curled downward, and she leaned forward in her chair, prepared to leap at the door and flee but still frightened of Shawna’s retribution. “I was captured and held against my will!”

“You were legally confined on the word of the woman who claimed to love you. The foundation for such a relationship is rotten at its very core.”

“Don’t talk about Wendy like that!” Lana realized too late she had shrieked the words like an eagle; her hand jerked and spilled the overflowing ashtray into her lap and all over the floor. She stood and stomped for the ashes to fall off of her clothing. “We’re done here.” She crossed her arms across her chest and fought them tight, purse cinched close to her body like a girth strap around a horse. “And if you really—really had a struggle in college, or any other time for that matter—” Her lip curled in disgust. “I feel sorry for you, that you wound up thinking marrying a man to satisfy everyone but yourself is the answer. I’m going to be who I am, regardless of what anyone else has to say for it. I owe Wendy that much.”

Wendy wouldn’t want me to do this. Wendy wouldn’t want me to storm out. She did anyway, slamming her door of the office in her wake. Her footfalls pinched the thin carpet and elicited a much louder click than before as she followed the narrow corridor back to the waiting room. Wendy would want me to try and get better and stomach whatever bullshit I had to hear in order to do it. Wendy had always been far more tolerant than Lana could ever dream.

Heads jerked up as her careless long strides carried her through the waiting room, across it, to the hallway through which she had entered. Her breath hitched in her throat and caught in her chest, syncopating the rhythm of her heart, which erupted into an erratic thrashing. Sweat beaded on her brow and in the palms of her hands. Tunnel vision blackened everything in front of her, save for the portal at its distant end, the doors across the room. Not here. Not like this. She swallowed a dry lump in her throat. What had she done the last time? She’d panicked—like usual. What did Mary Eunice do? Mary Eunice wrapped her up so tight, she could hear nothing save for the heartbeat to her ear, throbbing with a pace to match her own, and the prayers whispered just above her head; she could feel nothing but the rosary clutched between the two of them and the grace showering over her, and she wondered for a brief, confused moment if the grace belonged to God or Mary Eunice herself. Lana’s arms cinched around her middle, trying to replicate the sensation of a hug, fighting to recall the exact tone of Mary Eunice’s voice.

“Miss Winters?” She flinched in her flight, just in the doorframe of the waiting room, and whirled around to face Jeremy. He stared at her shoes, but his mouth trembled in a concerned line. “Are you—are you alright?”

No. I’m not alright, and no one is willing to help me get better. Lana nodded in a single jerk of her head; she shifted not to face him, crossed arms easing. A shudder passed down her shoulders. She licked her lips. “Yeah, I—I’m okay.” What would Mary Eunice say right now? Lana couldn’t remember any of her favorite Bible verses. But in her head, Mary Eunice began to chant her rosary, soft but clear. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us
sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen. The distant croak, the rattling of rosary beads, Lana pictured Mary Eunice knelt in prayer at the side of the bed, everything around her in a silent peace. “Your doctor was right,” Lana managed to say, and her voice held steady. “She wanted to fix me. The parts that aren’t broken.”

His gaze softened. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. I didn’t expect anything more.” Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. “I… I think I’m going to start writing the cooking column again.” Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. “If there’s an audience, my editor will like it.” Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen. “And it’ll give me something to do.” Jeremy’s eyes lit up, but in Lana’s mind, Mary Eunice paced around the kitchen, smattered in flour from head to toe, laughing as she shook salt or poured sugar or sliced carrots. She had a source of recipes now. Walt would be ecstatic.

“Thank you, Miss Winters.” A woman emerged from the back corridor, and called out Jeremy’s name with a clipboard in her hand. “That’s me. I have to go.” Jeremy lifted a hand and waved, and Lana bid him a quiet farewell. As his shape retreated toward the nurse, Lana retreated from the waiting room, from the hallway, from the building. Somewhere in her wake, one of the secretaries—probably the pretty one—called for her to make another appointment, but she waved her off and kept her beeline toward the sidewalk.

The pharmacy granted her the prescription Dr. Dillon had called in, and then she spent a few minutes picking up the things Mary Eunice needed from the supermarket. Todd was there, and Lana went through a different, longer line to avoid making eye contact with him. She didn’t know what he knew, but she didn’t want to tempt him. With her bags, she loaded her car and drove back home.

As she unlocked the front door and cracked it open, a sweet voice sang, “The hills are alive with the sound of music, with songs they have sung for a thousand years…” An amalgamation of spices assaulted Lana’s palate. Goodness, it smells like Thursday already. Gus jumped from in front of the television and ran to greet her; Lana paused to scratch him behind the ears before she locked the door behind her and followed the lyrics into the kitchen. The notes rested far out of Mary Eunice’s alto vocal range, but it didn’t keep her from launching into the song with reckless abandon. “The hills fill my heart with the sound of music. My heart wants to sing every song it hears.”

“I never should’ve let Lois take us to see that movie.” Lana placed the bags on the floor; the counters overflowed already with food.

Mary Eunice whirled around, eyes bright. “Lana!” A broad grin broke across her face, and she opened her arms, only hesitating to ask, “Can I?” Lana filled the empty space between their bodies. The world shivered as Lana met the embrace, each of them locking their arms behind the other’s back. The rainy scent, the perfume unique to Mary Eunice, wafted across Lana’s face. Oh, god, I love you so much. Her eyes stung with tears, and she pinched them closed tight to keep from shedding them. She buried her face in the crook of the soft, white neck. “Are you okay?” Mary Eunice probed. The brightness to her tone disappeared, replaced by concern; as much as Lana lauded her own ability to read people, Mary Eunice analyzed her like the pages of her Bible and found the source of all her trouble. One arm disconnected from their fast hold on one another, which Lana almost protested before the hand landed in her hair and began to stroke in long, petting motions. Lana bobbed her head and gulped back her tears. She wouldn’t cry, not now. “Do you want to tell me?”

Maybe, eventually. Lana’s voice had evacuated the scene. A warm kiss planted on her forehead eased the quivering ball of nerves in her stomach, and she lifted her face with puckered lips to
receive a second, indulgent kiss; Mary Eunice granted it without a moment of guessing, mouth to
mouth, giving breath and life to one another once again. I shouldn’t. But I love her. Lana still
clung to her around the middle. As Mary Eunice broke the gentle kiss, Lana exhaled, and all of
her troubles rolled from her mouth in that single breath. “I was right,” she said. The
disappointment ached somewhere in her neck. “She… wasn’t concerned with anything
important.”

Mary Eunice tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry.” Her big blue eyes, each deep as its
own ocean, softened. “I shouldn’t have asked you to go.”

“No, you—you were right. I needed to find out.” Lana released Mary Eunice at long last, feeling
she could stand on her own once more. “I got the prescription, and hopefully that will help keep
me from—from breaking down again, or will help me control it.” She picked up the first of her
bags and began to unload it into the cabinets and refrigerator. “Is some of this for us to eat tonight,
or is it all for Thanksgiving?”

“Oh, um—it’s samples.” Lana arched an eyebrow at her. “I wanted you to try some of the stuff I
wasn’t sure about, so I know if I should make more or not—some of it is, uh, not my idea of tasty
—I tried the tea with two cups of sugar, my stomach’s been hurting ever since, and I think I’m
going to take the sin of sugar consumption to confession for good measure.” Lana chuckled at her
antics, her eyes averted, but she couldn’t escape Mary Eunice’s watchful blue eyes, devotion held
there deep as the ocean itself. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” Lana reassured her. The aching inside of her chest and stomach filled her, but she
didn’t want to talk about it. Mary Eunice worked all day on this food. The scrumptious scents
awakened all of her cravings and appetites. “If the tea makes you nauseous, that means you did it
right.” Mary Eunice’s face tinted a pale shade of green as Lana got a glass and poured it to the
brim, filled with the brown liquid. “You really don’t have to make all of this food, you know.
There’s only going to be five of us—and that’s if Earl comes. It’s not like him to participate in
Thanksgiving.”

“Why not?”

Lana shrugged. “He believes it advocates for the genocide of the Native American people through
supporting the European invasion of the continent.” Mary Eunice’s eyes fluttered wide with alarm.
“I know. Barbaric, right?” Lana took the plates out of the top cabinet and passed one to Mary
Eunice. “He’s probably right. But I want to eat turkey, so I don’t care. My life got turned into a
political crusade. I deserve holidays.” Mary Eunice accepted the plate, still scouring Lana’s figure
with her eyes. The gaze didn’t make her feel scrutinized, though; the pit of her stomach swelled
with something warm and pleasant pooling there, almost—but not quite—enough for her to forget
the troubles of the day. “So it’ll probably just be the four of us. And Barb and Lois will bring
something, too. Barb likes to make beef stew.”

Mary Eunice waited for Lana to fill her plate; she took much smaller portions than usual, and she
brought a glass of water with her to the kitchen table. “Aunt Celest always said that at least three
more people than RSVP’d would show up.”

Sitting across from her, Lana waited in silence for Mary Eunice to bow her head in prayer, not
touching her fork until she recognized the Sign of the Cross. Once Mary Eunice met Lana’s eyes
again, she inclined her eyebrows, offering a slight chuckle. “Celest didn’t strike me as the type to
host parties.”

“Oh, no. She was usually the one who showed up without the RSVP.” This chuckle, Lana
couldn’t muffle; she snorted so loud, her noodles fell off of her fork and landed in the middle of
her plate again. “Or without an invitation at all.”
They passed their dinner with mild exchanges, Mary Eunice passing Gus chunks of meat under the table and Lana pretending not to notice. Once they had cleared their plates, Mary Eunice took all of the dirty dishes to the sink. Lana gave everything a vote of approval, particularly the tea, as she helped herself to another glass and sipped at when she took Gus outside. Fat flakes of snow drifted from the darkening gray sky. He didn’t linger on the dead, brown lawn. Once he had relieved himself, he charged back into the house, tail tucked between his legs and shivering from head to toe. He scrambled onto the couch and burrowed into the blanket. Lana sat beside him and flicked on the television in search of something to watch.

The sink faucet died in the kitchen. “Sister?” Lana called. “Is Bonanza okay to watch tonight?” She didn’t know why she asked; Mary Eunice would never contradict her. “The news is on, too,” she offered as some secondary option.

“Whatever you want to watch.” The answer came as no surprise to Lana. She flicked the channel to the black and white horses galloping across the screen, the faces of Lorne Greene, Michael Landon, and Dan Blocker appearing in order. Mary Eunice returned with her knitting needles and yarn, and she nudged Gus to bump him over. He scooted over, leaving room for her sink onto the couch beside Lana, and then he placed his head in her lap. “Poor, cold baby.” She stroked the top of his head, rubbing the warmth back into his floppy ears. A long whine drew from his chest, and he rolled over, exposing his soft underside to receive more scratches. When she ignored him, he pawed at her forearm. “Not right now.”

Lana glanced at the large open bit of yarn Mary Eunice had knitted. “What are you working on now?” It was almost as long as the throw blanket on the couch.

Blue eyes darted up to her from the project. A shadow passed over her expression, something almost secretive to the crinkles around her mouth. What? Lana wondered. Did I say something wrong? “It’s a sweater—the body, actually.” She crafted stitch after stitch with the utmost precision, fingers working with more methodicism than a pianist’s on the keys. She stitches faster than I type.

“I like that color.” Lana resisted the urge to caress the soft ball of azure yarn, lest she interrupt Mary Eunice’s pattern and mess up the rhythm. She had learned over the years of watching Wendy knit better than to interfere with the project; one misstep could send a whole project spiraling out of control and make it scrap. Mary Eunice hummed a vague agreement, a small smile on her lips. Lana dared to press a bit further. “It’s like your eyes.”

The compliment worked; Mary Eunice’s cheeks tinted a light, tickled pink, grin spreading enough for her to cover her mouth with her hand. “Thank you.” She glanced up to Lana, a certain nervousness as she leaned closer. Lana placed an arm around her shoulders. The rhythm of her hands worked through her whole body, shoulders and neck twitching in the most subtle ways. A purse of concentration appeared on her lips. A wrinkle knotted between her eyebrows. “I love you, Lana,” she said, voice quiet as her silently fluttering fingers caressing one another, spinning the needles and yarn in an organized flurry.

With a sigh, tension eased from Lana’s shoulders. She leaned over and pressed a gentle kiss to Mary Eunice’s cheek. “I love you, too, sunshine.” More than I ought to. More than you know. The guilt bloomed inside her chest every time she whispered those words, knowing she meant them in ways Mary Eunice never would. Lana took a piece of Mary Eunice’s hair and tucked it behind her ear. “Sister Sunshine.” The twisting hands stilled. All of the muscles under Lana’s embracing arm drew up taut. Her face froze, angled downward, staring at the product in her lap, lips parted in a blank ogle. “Sister?” Lana prompted, quieter, concern darkening her voice. She’s remembering something. “Sister? Hey—what’s wrong?”
“Say that again.” Nothing about her eased; her low voice formed a desperate croak.

I’m not sure I want to. Lana licked her lips. “Sister Sunshine?” she repeated.

Mary Eunice flinched. Her brain gathered up its guns and fired a twenty-one gun salute, each flare of bullets starting new memories from her mind. “Little Sister! My ray of sunshine!” Light glinted on Dr. Arden’s glasses, but he flickered away into a new reflection, glowering at a statue of the Virgin Mary and cursing, “You great slut!” The picture dissipated into pixels and assembled in his office once again, opening a box of glistening ruby earrings—the earrings the Monsignor had brought Mary Eunice when he brought the box of her things, the earrings she had feared touching and left hidden under the bed until she discovered their origin, for she knew she hadn’t owned them before her possession. She dangled the glamorous gems out in the firelight so they reflected their brightest color. “They belonged to a Jewess in the camp,” Dr. Arden said. “She was always reminding people that she was a woman of considerable means, and that her husband was an influential and wealthy doctor in Berlin.” He didn’t make eye contact with her as he stood and paced the office floor. “She was constantly complaining to me about her stomach problems, and as a doctor, I thought I ought to do something about it. So I followed her, one day, to the latrine, thinking I might diagnose her condition if I had a stool sample.”

He paused, turning to appraise her while she appraised herself in the handheld mirror, the heavy earrings dangling from her earlobes—lobes which had never been pierced, which the demon had plunged the points of the earrings into without a second thought, prompting droplets of blood to trickle down behind each ear. “She was in there, on her hands and knees, picking through her own feces to retrieve those earrings. She confessed to me that she swallowed them, every day, day after day, carrying them around inside of her, as if someday she might return to her former grandeur. Oh, ridiculous woman.” He paused, a hand to his temple. “She died from internal bleeding. The earrings were very hard on her intestines. Obviously, I retrieved them. I knew someday I’d meet someone who was worthy of their exceptional beauty.”

She grinned at him, full and flush and ignored the screaming little girl inside of her. “You were very clever to retrieve them, Arthur!” She called him his name, the one he’d given himself to hide from the American government and take shelter from his war crimes. Rising from the desk, she ran to him, long tights under her habit not inhibiting her step; cast in the firelight, she knew the flames made her radiant in front of him, and his every thought rose to meet her ears, mingling arousal and affection with disappointment and horror. “Look how beautiful they are on me.” He gazed back at her, long, bearing no smile on his grisled cheeks. “They bring out the rose in my cheeks,” she said, trying to prompt him, wanting to win his affections back; somehow, the transition from innocent nun to empowered fiend had lost her the deepest of Dr. Arden’s loyalty, and the demon needed him to accomplish every goal. He turned away from her. “Oh, you’re such a sap.” She swatted him on the arm, playful and grinning, but nothing she did engaged him. Laughing, she strode away, taking the mirror again to look at herself, expecting him to follow.

He did not. “Not exactly for the reason you may think.” His voice had grown in volume, a punctuated lilt of disgust to his words. “But a sap, nonetheless.” He turned his back to her, covering his face with his hands, tall shoulders shrinking in the shadows. “I so dearly hoped you’d throw them back in my face, that you couldn’t bring yourself to touch those shit-stained earrings. I was hoping there’d be a glimmer of horror, a glimmer of that precious girl who was too afraid even to take a bite of my candy apple…” A wry, melancholy chuckle tagged the end of his voice; tears gleamed in his pale eyes, and he cast his sight away from her, away from her rebuke, which arrived all too soon.

Again, they dissolved, and they reappeared in the snow-covered landscape of the forest where Dr. Arden stored the raspers. “Wouldn’t it be fun if we gave her a transorbital lobotomy? Crack that thick skull open like a walnut?”
“No.”

She paused, frowning; the demon could not comprehend how he had changed so much from the first encounter, when he craved Mary Eunice, to now, when he loathed her, when only the affection for the weeping girl inside of this shell kept him from placing a bullet between his own two eyes. “Why not?”

“Because you wish it.” He glowered back at her. As the raspers crawled out of the cold landscape, he shot them; at the first discharge of the gun, the girl flinched in surprise and cried out. He arched an eyebrow at her, and the demon took control again. “The experiment is over.” Some took bullets between the eyes, some to the chest, each one collapsing before it reached the meat she’d prepared for them so arduously in the kitchen.

The demon snickered; it saw no need to remark on the brief hiccup of power exchange. “My, my. Quite a tantrum, Arthur.”

He lifted the pistol to his face. “It’s a farce,” he said, tears budding at the corners of his eyes. “Finite la comedia.” As the barrel of the gun wedged under the brow of his left eye, he released a broken sob, finger propped up on the trigger but unable to pull it. He collapsed before her, landing on his knees and weeping without rhyme or reason. “You have no idea what it means to have lost you,” he whimpered in a voice much smaller than one befitting a man of his stature.

She squatted before him, holding eye contact, their faces inches apart, close enough for their lips to touch. “Jesus Christ.” She shook her head. “You’re being pitiful, Arthur.”

She stood, but he wrapped his arms around her thighs, pulling her closer. “Then have pity on me,” he plead, pushing the cold weight of the gun into her hand. But the demon still had a role for him; the demon still had work for him; the demon still had a role for him to play. And it saw no reason to give him the easy, painless way out of this world. Like any other occupant, he had to suffer. She shoved him. He rolled away, grunting and groaning, and she stormed back up the path toward the asylum.

“Sister. Sister.” Lana shook her from her reverie, both hands on her shoulders, tugging her out of the dreams and the memories and the horrifying remnant sensations which she could not lose. “Look at me. What’s happened? What’s wrong?” Thumbs caught the tears rolling down her cheeks, tears she hadn’t noticed until now which continued to slide unbidden from her eyes. “Tell me what you remember.”

Lana knew, and somehow that made it both better and worse; Mary Eunice abandoned her knitting and bowed her head to curl up into Lana’s arms, and the television flicked back to its black screen, all of their focus on one another. Mary Eunice didn’t know where to begin. “Dr. Arden is a Nazi—he was at Auschwitz—”

“He told you?”

She shook her head, gulping hard. The inside of her mouth tasted hot and insatiable, thick as syrup. She wanted water. “I don’t know—I’m not sure—I think Sister Jude found out, but I—I found the historian before she did—I don’t remember!” She hiccuped. One of her hands clawed at her thigh, but Lana caught it in hers. “He gave me these earrings, from the camp, from a—a Jewish woman who kept eating them to try to protect them until she bled to death!”

Lana’s lip curled in disgust. Mary Eunice’s stomach flipped; she feared she would vomit on the spot, and she covered her mouth with her hands, muffling her whimpers as Lana tugged her ever nearer, near enough that she could hear the too-fast thumping of the other’s heart to her ear. A tender kiss, cool to the touch, planted on her brow. Mary Eunice heaved uneven breaths until she
trusted herself to speak without losing what remained of her sanity. “He used to call me—he used to call me his little ray of sunshine—” Her heart flipped once more. It was so different when Lana said it. Lana meant it out of love, out of the friendship they shared and their joined hands and hearts, out of mutual affection which she knew she offered with too much strength. Dr. Arden had known nothing for her but lust and the vicarious living through an innocence he had never known.

One of Lana’s soft hands caressed her cheek. “Do you want me to stop calling you that?”

“No—it’s different, with you, it’s not the same thing, I just—” The ball of nerves tumbled inside the pit of her stomach. I don’t know how to explain it. Guilt and grief all mingled into one, and she wrung her hands, unable to recall more, though she knew more laid in her head, resting in dormancy, waiting to ambush her and chase her into meekness once again. Her lips and tongue trembled in synchronization, unable to form words beyond the quiet buffering which tripped her vocal cords. “I don’t think I’ll ever feel forgiven. I don’t think I’ll ever stop apologizing for—for everything, for all the people I hurt, and all the wrong I did…” She leaned into Lana’s palm on her cheek. “I’m indulgent, Lana. You’re too good to me.”

“I know.” Mary Eunice lifted her tear-sheened eyes to Lana’s, flicking them down to her lips, and Lana rewarded her by planting a gentle kiss to her lips. It isn’t wrong. We’re just friends. We’ll never be anything more. The Bible never says friends can’t kiss. “I love you.” She toyed with the fingers all wrapped up in hers, pad of her thumb tracing their mountains and valleys. “Thank you.”

Lana tucked another lock of her hair behind her ear. A softness rested in her deep brown eyes, darker than coffee, and Mary Eunice held her gaze while she focused on quelling the last of her nerves flopping around in her stomach, soothing the last remnants of her memories; they never lingered too long when Lana held her. “Can I ask you something?” Mary Eunice nodded in earnest, eyes fluttering wide. I’ll help any way I can. “Do you think…” Lana sucked her lower lip. Mary Eunice tried not to notice too much how it vanished into her mouth, how it glistened with saliva when it emerged. “Do you think I’m sick?”

“No—No, of course not! Why would you ask that? I could never think that about you, or about anyone, not anymore.” She took Lana’s hand and brought it to her lips, kissing the back of her knuckles, and Lana lifted those beautiful brown eyes up from her lap, shining with something deep and crystalline and loving. As she caressed the soft palm of Lana’s hand, lowering it from her mouth, she said, “I love you. The way you are.” You’ve made me realize the way I am, and I don’t know if I’m grateful for that or not. Her tongue darted across her lips, curling her toes into the shag carpet. I wish I could tell you. I wish I could tell you even a small piece of what I feel for you right now. “Is this all about what the therapist said?”

“Guess.” She averted her eyes, and withdrawing her hand, she left Mary Eunice grapping at the empty air; in spite of the arm around her shoulders, she longed for the way their fingers together. “Yeah, it—it is. I know it’s stupid to let someone like that get in my head, but it’s hard not to, and she—she just seemed so sure, and—” She raised her eyebrows, shaking her head, as if still caught in the disbelief. “In some backward way, it almost made sense.” It couldn’t have...
made that much sense. You’re perfect. No one could find too much wrong with you; even a particularly scrutinious person would struggle. “She was the first person—the first one I’ve talked to, anyway. I’m sure there are more—but she was the first one who ever told me, outright, that it was Wendy’s fault, and I…” Lana’s voice dropped to a melancholy whisper. “I don’t even know what to say to defend her.”

Oh, Lana. Mary Eunice’s heart wrenched, reflecting the anguish on Lana’s twisted face, mouth drawn downward, tears on the surface of her eyes; they stung Mary Eunice’s in turn, where she had just managed to stifle them. “It’s no one else’s business. Your job is to take care of yourself. You don’t owe anyone an explanation.”

“I owe it to Wendy!” At the snap of Lana’s voice, Mary Eunice flinched, and she whispered an apology and brushed her hair behind her ears, cold hand to her own cheek. “Wendy deserves better than their slander. She died in the—the most horrible way, because of me, and the least I can do is try to save her reputation.”

“It’s not your fault,” Mary Eunice murmured. I wish I knew how to fix all of this. I would do it in a heartbeat. “I think Wendy would understand. You can’t keep your own name from appearing in the papers. You’re doing the best you can.” Lana leaned over, resting her head on Mary Eunice’s shoulder so the sweet scent of her hair floated up around Mary Eunice, wreathing her in safety. She pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

A soft sob made Lana’s shoulders quake. Neither of us are whole. We’re both so broken. Mary Eunice wrapped her arms around Lana’s body. “I miss her so much,” Lana whimpered, wiping away her own tears with her fists. It stabbed Mary Eunice in the gut. “I love her, and I just can’t stop—I feel so guilty, I know it’s wrong, but I do. I just imagine her watching me all the time, and frowning on all of my choices, on how I spend my time.”

“Wendy wouldn’t frown on you, ever.” Mary Eunice didn’t know how she spoke with such conviction; she had never met Wendy, had had no interaction with her beyond the prayers she sent every day for Wendy’s soul to cross into heaven and find peace and look after Lana from above. But she knew Wendy must have loved Lana as much as she did, if not more. She found it hard to fathom anyone spending time with Lana without loving her. “She wouldn’t blame you, either. She wouldn’t want you to be torturing yourself.”

“I know,” Lana whispered. She offered her hand again, and Mary Eunice took it. “How do you know so well? How do you understand?”

Because I love you the same way she did. “Intuition,” Mary Eunice answered in a hum, a small smile spreading across her face.

They lingered in the silence for a moment, each of them with a throbbing head and stinging eyes from all of the tears they had shed, each wiping her dripping nose and sniffing away the snot. “You make it better,” Lana said. “Being here. I can’t imagine where I’d be without you. Holding you, and—and the kissing, it all helps. I just, I want you to know that.”

“It helps me, too.” I never feel safer than when your lips are on mine, and I confess it to my priest and pray my recompense, but I can never imagine ceasing. My world will never be the same again. Lana pressed a cool, flush kiss to Mary Eunice’s lips, easing her knotted stomach into a flurry of butterflies. Her eyes fell closed, and she leaned into the warm caress of their mouths; a secret craving deep inside of her wanted more , wanted to give Lana the permission to do anything and everything she wanted.

But Lana severed, and they gazed at one another in the emptiness. Mary Eunice planted another peck on her lips. Lana chuckled. “I forgot to mention something.” What? Lana read the question
on her face. “I need you to teach me how to cook. I’m going to be doing the cooking column again, and I’ll need help to make it something other than fire-starting recipes.”

An easy laugh floated from Mary Eunice’s chest. The pain was still there, the memories under the surface, but she had Lana, too. Lana made everything else seem dull and insignificant. “Alright,” she agreed. “Anything you say.”
A Season for Every Activity Under the Heavens

Chapter Notes

Ecclesiastes 31:8

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Lana had survived more things than she cared to review. She knew, better than anyone else, how to grit her teeth and endure whatever lemons life decided to throw at her, and when life stopped throwing lemons and started throwing boulders instead, she still found a way to make stone soup. She prided herself in having a great understanding of chaos and human nature and the patterns of the world. But in spite of all her experience in surviving the world’s storms, absolutely nothing had prepared Lana for Sister Mary Eunice on the morning of Thanksgiving.

More food scents floated from the kitchen in steam and smoke and spices than Lana could count. In the back corner of the living room, the box holding the Christmas tree was propped against the wall, surrounded by boxes of ornaments. Fast-paced, high-pitched humming accompanied the sounds of boiling and sizzling and timers buzzing, the best indication of Mary Eunice’s nervousness; more than once, Lana heard her praying aloud, the rhythm of her rosary granting her some unknown grace. She dared to steal a glance into the kitchen once, spying Mary Eunice with her hair frizzed above her head and wide eyes crazed. I better wait until tonight to eat anything. I’ll drink out of the garden hose if I must.

Lana passed the day writing in her office, not brave enough to disturb the kitchen, and only when her thirst got the better of her did she rise to find Mary Eunice working on setting the table. “You added the leif,” Lana observed with a small smile. “C’mon. You’ve got fifteen minutes before the company arrives. You’ve been up since dawn. You need to sit down for a minute.” She took the ceramic dishes from Mary Eunice’s hands and placed them on the table in a stack. “You don’t have anyone to impress, you know. It doesn’t have to be perfect.” She wrapped one of Mary Eunice’s hands in her own; the fingers were chilly to the touch. “Come here. Sit with me.”

Guiding her by the hand, Lana eased both of them onto the couch. “I don’t have time—I haven’t gotten dressed yet—there’s still pots to wash—glasses to set out—”

Lana leaned forward as if to kiss her, lips puckered, and Mary Eunice silenced her own rambling, mouth buffering in tiny, inaudible syllables. “I’m glad you want this to be special, alright? But you don’t have to break your back for this.” She rubbed the hand in her grasp, trying to warm the frigid fingers. Anxiety makes her cold. Mary Eunice’s palms had a generous layer of sweat. Lana took the hem of the sleeve of her sweater, but before she could roll up the fabric to reveal the skin underneath, Mary Eunice snatched her arm back to her body, folding it across her chest. Lana flinched from the sudden movement; she lifted her hands in reflex to protect her face from any blows. But Mary Eunice didn’t threaten her; she sucked her lower lip as she met Lana’s gaze, apprehension laying in the crinkles around her eyes and mouth. Lana cleared her throat. “Let me see your arm,” she said. Mary Eunice tensed. What’s gotten into her? Lana wondered. “Please,” she amended, softening her approach. “I want to see that you’re okay.”

Hesitation crossed her face like a shadow, but she unfolded her arm from her chest, allowing Lana to take her by the hand. She rolled up the sleeve of the sweater. Each inch of fabric removed betrayed an inch of flesh carved by anxious fingernails. Fresh, bloody scabs lined her pale skin,
marring the faint freckles there. Red lines drew patterns from wound to wound. “It’s not as bad as it looks.” Mary Eunice’s words leapt too quickly to her defense. “I just—I didn’t realize—I was nervous, I wasn’t thinking—” She cut herself off, gulping and drumming her feet on the carpet, every bit of her fidgeting and shifting beside Lana. “I was about to go clean it up, I swear.” Lana’s gaze darted to her other hand, where blood clotted under her fingernails. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me.” Lana turned her hand over in her grasp, but the underside of Mary Eunice’s pale arm had gone untouched. Blue veins moved under her skin like winter brooks, undercurrents shifting below the ice. Wow. Lana caressed the inside of her wrist with the pad of her thumb, trailing up the arm, following up to the crook of her elbow. She’s so beautiful. Her body is beautiful. Mary Eunice flexed her fingers, and the muscles and tendons under Lana’s dexterous touch shifted as well, moving better than any well-oiled machinery. Marveling at the movement, the pulse in Mary Eunice’s wrist fluttered at her, much higher than its usual pace. The rapid firing of her heart sent her hot blood blooming through all of her extremities, oxygen rushing to every cell in her body through the heaving of her chest, sweat making her palms slick, all evidence of the sheer life inside Mary Eunice’s skull and chest. Lana leaned forward, and this time, she made their lips touch in a gentle kiss, mouth on mouth. Her tongue brushed the outside of Mary Eunice’s lower lip. No. Don’t do that. She refused to allow herself anything more.

A cold hand cupped her cheek. All of Lana’s resolve crumbled. Their noses bumped over one another, breath fanning across each other’s faces, eyes flicking up to make contact just long enough to ascertain the mutual agreement. Lana slipped her mouth from Mary Eunice’s. Her arms spun around the other’s waist and tugged her closer; Mary Eunice scrambled to sprawl across Lana’s lap, breathless, mouth open. What is this? Lana asked herself. Another part answered, Making her feel better. Making her relax. She pressed a tender kiss to the crook of Mary Eunice’s neck, and the tension trickled out of all the muscles beneath her hands; Lana had wrung out the sponge that was Mary Eunice, and all of the stress poured down the drain. She formed a trail of gentle kisses from under her ear all the way to the front of her throat, which flexed as Mary Eunice swallowed. It’s not sexual. It can’t be. She likes it, and that’s what matters.

She lifted her face from the expanse of alabaster neck beneath her. Warm breath in an exhale fanned across her face. “How do you always know?” Mary Eunice whispered.

Lana smoothed her hand up to her shoulders and rubbed them. “Clearly, I didn’t notice anything peculiar. I just read your mind.” A weak chuckle answered her. But the easiness on Lana’s face faded, hardened, and likewise, Mary Eunice’s grin vanished behind closed lips. “You need to stop picking. You’re going to get an infection eventually.” She glanced down at the shiny, wet streak her saliva had left behind on Mary Eunice’s exposed neck from the licking and gentle sucking. Mary Eunice’s face tinted a pleasant shade of pink, the embarrassment crawling up her neck and around the backs of her ears. “Come with me. I have an idea.” She nudged Mary Eunice out of her lap. Golden hair moving in a scattered waterfall, she rose from Lana’s lap and stood.

Lana led the way back to the bathroom, Mary Eunice walking as a shadow, feet falling directly into the places Lana’s had just vacated in the shag carpet. “Here.” Warming the water in the faucet, Lana tugged her arm under it, letting the soft red scabs fade and dissipate under the stream. Mary Eunice nibbled on the fingernails of her other hand until Lana swatted her hand away. “You’re a walking nervous tic,” she said, narrowing her eyes. Mary Eunice ducked in embarrassment. No, don’t embarrass her. Don’t make her feel ashamed. “It’s okay, you know,” she amended, a little softer. “Nobody is going to eat you. I’m sure you’ve made enough food to ensure they won’t have the appetite for it. You don’t need to be nervous.”

“I know.” The lower pink lip vanished between pearly teeth. “I just—I am nervous, even though I don’t want to be.” Lana took a soft washcloth and used hand soap on the open scratches on her arm. “You don’t have to—I can do it myself.” She fidgeted as the water dripped off of her hand.
and fingertips in clear rivulets, running down the drain. “I’m the one who did it.”

Shushing her, Lana waited for the last suds of soap to vanish before she straightened, patting dry the thin wounds. “Let me wrap it up.” Reaching into the cabinet under the sink, she found the Neosporin and rubbed bits of it over each scratch, and then she bound Mary Eunice’s arm in bandages from the wrist up to the elbow. “Alright. Now let me teach you something.” Big blue eyes focused on her with the utmost intensity, a slight grin curled on her pretty pink lips. Lana took a rubber band from the bucket of hair supplies and slipped it over Mary Eunice’s wrist. “This is called operant conditioning. There was this guy, B. F. Skinner, who talked about the causes and effects of intentional behavior.”

Small pink lips formed a purse of concern. “Like Pavlov’s dogs?”

“Sort of. Pavlov studied—I don’t know, some other form of conditioning. I wasn’t into science and psychology. That was Wendy’s thing. She told me about Skinner so I would stop biting my nails.” Mary Eunice nodded in agreement. “This should work just as well for the picking. They’re both nervous habits, anyway. So, it works like this: operant conditioning is the process of punishment and reward for behavior reinforcement.” Mary Eunice flinched on the word punishment, eyes darting from Lana’s face to her hands, like she expected to receive a slap at the mere mention of retribution. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. Lana paused in her speech, the muscles in her neck and shoulders tightening like a knight crowding behind an invisible iron shield. She brushed her hand against the back of Mary Eunice’s to soften the stress within her. She’s just nervous. These have been a hard few days. “Relax,” she said, and she waited for the spidery digits of Mary Eunice’s hands to unwrap the slight fist they’d formed. “It’s simple, I promise. Whenever you get the urge to pick at your skin, or catch yourself doing it, you take this rubber band, and you pop it.” She popped it to demonstrate. Mary Eunice flinched where the rubber cracked against her skin.

The silence lingered in the air. Then, Mary Eunice dared to ask, “So I should stop hurting myself and instead… hurt myself differently?”

“Not exactly. This isn’t a nervous habit. But if you like to think of it that way, then do it. I won’t stop you.” Skepticism didn’t loosen itself from the corners of Mary Eunice’s lips. Lana frowned. “I just don’t like you hurting yourself. You could get an infection. You’ve already got scars. There are healthier ways to cope with the anxiety—which is rich coming from me, I know, but…”

“It’s okay,” Mary Eunice said. “You don’t—You don’t have to explain it to me. I trust you.” She extended her hand to reach for Lana’s again, and Lana granted it, a loose clasp between them, palm folded against palm. Good. Lana rubbed the back of Mary Eunice’s hand with the pad of her thumb. I haven’t earned your trust. I don’t deserve it. She accepted the little kiss Mary Eunice planted on her lips, chaste and gentle, with closed eyes. When they locked gazes again, Lana could smell the mint of freshly brushed teeth on Mary Eunice’s breath, faces mere inches apart. “Lana, I…” She withdrew, straightening her back. “I was wondering, uh, what—if there’s anything—if you’d rather me not… be that way, in front of everyone else.” What? Lana’s brows quirked together in confusion at the mumbled, stammered words. She braced herself for the barrage of hateful thoughts, but it didn’t make them sting less. Why? Are you ashamed? Are you embarrassed of me? She knew, with every piece of her logical mind, no such thing was true, but even then, she couldn’t shut out the awful, doubting suspicions. “I—I mean, not that I—it doesn’t make any difference to me—I just, Barb and Lois asked the last time, and Earl, um…” She fidgeted, shifting her weight from foot to foot, wringing her hands. The right hand went to her left arm, fingernails out and pointing downward like claws, but before they made contact, she caught herself and popped the rubber band against her wrist. It cracked like a whip in the air between them. “I just don’t want things to be uncomfortable for you.”
Of course, Lana. She’s not your girlfriend. She doesn’t want people to think she’s your girlfriend. She’s a platonic friend who treats you like a normal platonic friend. She isn’t afraid of you because of who you are—and she’s the first to ever do this, and you think it’s exclusive because she’s affectionate. Don’t be ridiculous. “Of course,” Lana soothed. “I don’t want anyone to get the wrong idea.” A deep blush of shame crawled all over Mary Eunice’s face. Regret pierced Lana’s abdomen. How had she allowed herself to fall so irrevocably in love with a woman who had no chance of ever returning her feelings? How had she managed to place all of her remaining affection on someone who would panic, fling away in disgust, if she knew the truth? Mary Eunice loved her, but Lana knew better than anyone how love would vanish with a single misstep. 

I told Lois and Barb too much. They can’t see us kiss again. They’ll get the wrong idea. If they approach her, I won’t be able to save her. “What—What about Earl?”

“Oh, uh…” Mary Eunice bit her lower lip, turning away and shuffling out of the bathroom; Lana followed her, turning off the light behind them. “He probably doesn’t remember,” she hedged. Lana arched an eyebrow at her in prompting. Tell me. She didn’t have to say the words for Mary Eunice to continue, slower, more reluctantly than before, and she fixed her eyes on the closet, fiddling through it to avoid meeting Lana’s gaze. She picked past every sweater and skirt and then back through again, glancing over the same sheets of clothing several times. “Earl, he was very drunk. He said he thought—or he worried—I don’t remember, really. He said, um—” She stopped hard once again, and her throat bobbed as she gulped, the words seeming to cause her a great deal of pain. Maybe I shouldn’t. Before Lana could object and withdraw her demands, Mary Eunice managed, “Earl thinks, or he thought, I might be in love with you.” The deep red of shame licked over Mary Eunice’s face like a flame consuming any dry wood tossed into its orange depths. Her long, spidery hands fidgeted in the empty air before she selected a long skirt and a patterned polka dot sweater. “He was really drunk, Lana, he…”

When Lana’s skeptical look didn’t fade, Mary Eunice cleared her throat. “He said he thought—or he worried—I don’t remember, really. He said, um—” She stopped hard once again, and her throat bobbed as she gushed, the words seeming to cause her a great deal of pain. Maybe I shouldn’t. Before Lana could object and withdraw her demands, Mary Eunice managed, “Earl thinks, or he thought, I might be in love with you.” The deep red of shame licked over Mary Eunice’s face like a flame consuming any dry wood tossed into its orange depths. Her long, spidery hands fidgeted in the empty air before she selected a long skirt and a patterned polka dot sweater. “He was really drunk, Lana, he…”

Lana didn’t hear any more of her words, though she continued rambling with reckless abandon. In love with me. Earl thinks so. She licked her lips, a high-pitched whining rising between her ears. Earl had never failed her in the past; he had belonged to the community longer than she’d been alive, and she had always, always trusted his judgment in regards to these matters. Well, this time, he’s wrong. You’re stupid for entertaining any such notion. It isn’t true, and you know better. Her tongue transformed into a dry sponge in her mouth, sucking away all of her saliva, all of her ability to ground herself in the moment. Why did this happen to her? She saw the blush on Mary Eunice’s face, bright as the sunset; she loathed to admit it, but it meant, irrevocably, Mary Eunice had no feelings for her. The mere notion embarrassed her. I am a fool. “Lana? Are you alright?”

Her silence had not escaped Mary Eunice’s notice, and she lifted her head, startled at the address. She gazed into Mary Eunice’s ocean-like eyes, flecked with green. I could dive into her eyes. The water would be cool. There would be a tide. The moon would hang heavily in the sky above me, and I would wrap myself in her love to keep from catching a chill. “Yes—Yes, of course. I’m fine.” Mary Eunice held a patterned geometric dress out to her, one with a skirt too short for Mary Eunice to willingly entertain, and Lana took it from her. “He was just drunk. He won’t remember. He didn’t mean any of it, I promise. You don’t have to worry about it.”

The words appeased Mary Eunice, whose smile eased across her face; the worry fled from the corners of her eyes and lips, and her dimples appeared. She extended one trembling hand and rested it on Lana’s hip, a point of safety. Lana took a single step nearer, closing the gap between them, the air between their bodies warm and soft, soft as her skin, soft as the petals of a rose. Mary Eunice’s pink lips puckered, and she leaned her head down, giving Lana the chance to complete the kiss. She did without hesitation.
Their worlds collided with the tenderest of caresses. Mary Eunice’s breath hitched when the kiss lost its brief, chaste appeal—her sharp intake of breath gusted across Lana’s nose—but she didn’t retreat. This is twice today. Twice just today. This can’t happen. I can’t do this. She doesn’t know the difference, but I do, I know the difference. I can’t take advantage of her. Mary Eunice tilted her head. Her mouth moved in warm, subtle undulations, pressing against Lana’s with a certain heat which emptied into the space around them when Lana severed the kiss like air whistling out of a balloon. The blush returned to Mary Eunice’s face, not red like before, but rosy and pink. “I’m sorry,” Lana said regardless.

Mary Eunice tilted her head. Her mouth moved in warm, subtle undulations, pressing against Lana’s with a certain heat which emptied into the space around them when Lana severed the kiss like air whistling out of a balloon. The blush returned to Mary Eunice’s face, not red like before, but rosy and pink. “I’m sorry,” Lana said regardless. Mary Eunice blinked in surprise. No, I—I like that. Don’t be sorry.”

A grin wobbled upon her lips. Lana couldn’t help but return it. “Then I guess I’m not sorry.” I should be. I shouldn’t let her do this. She pressed another quick, chaste kiss to Mary Eunice’s mouth, a farewell, a parting notion. “Let’s get dressed. They’ll be here soon.”

Mere seconds after Mary Eunice had changed from her flour-stained clothing and combed back her frazzled hair into the neat, churchy braid Lana adored, the doorbell rang; they both raced to answer it, Gus tangling underfoot with a series of loud barks booming through the house. Mary Eunice unlocked the door. Lois flung her arms around her neck. “Sis!” Mary Eunice scarcely caught her around the middle to keep them both from toppling into the floor. Wow! Her insides warmed at the tight greeting. “We brought sauerkraut. Barb said she was confident you couldn’t withstand the smell long enough to cook it.” She pecked Mary Eunice on the cheek. Mary Eunice tugged her back by the arm and freed the doorway for Barb to come through with an armload of her pot of sauerkraut. The stench accompanied, enough for Lana and Mary Eunice to crinkle their noses in synchronization. “It’s a German food,” Lois whispered to her ear, “and you don’t have to eat any of it. Barb can knock out the whole pot on her own if she wants.” Mary Eunice bobbed her head in agreement. I don’t think I could eat anything if I had that smell on my plate.

“That smells like turkey shit,” Lana said, straightening her back. “Don’t give it to Gus. His farts already stink enough.” Lois choked, and Barb nearly dropped the pot; hot water sloshed around inside.

“Have you heard from Earl? Is he coming?” Lois asked. Barb headed toward the kitchen to deposit the large pot of sauerkraut. Lana opened her mouth to respond, but Barb cut her off. “Jesus fucking Christ! How many people are coming? Who’s going to eat all of this? You’ve got enough for an army in here. How many of us do you think there are?” Mary Eunice’s face tinted into a deep blush at her barrage of words; she averted her eyes as Lois caught her hand and squeezed it in comfort.

“You can take as much of it as you want home!” Lana provided. Barb’s grumbling quieted with her satisfying words. She glanced back to Lois. “Earl never called me back. I don’t know if he’s coming or not. He said he would have to check his schedule.”

“That sounds like he’s trying to avoid celebrating genocide.” Barb came from the kitchen, plate already laden. “C’mon, girls. I’m not waiting up for him to not show up. The food is warm, and my stomach is empty.” Lana and Lois exchanged a glance before they shrugged and led the way into the kitchen; Mary Eunice shadowed them and tugged at the sleeve of her sweater. Her index fingers grazed the thick bandage Lana had secured around her arm. Quieter next time. A red mark sprang up around her wrist where the rubber band had popped her. She took a styrofoam plate and gave herself modest helpings; the mere sight of all the food surrounding her, most of it...
her own creation, made her guilty of gluttony. *I wonder how many people confess after Thanksgiving and Christmas. Probably a lot. But a sin committed by the masses is a sin nonetheless.* Sister Jude had never allowed anyone to overeat—but then again, there was rarely enough food to go around at Briarcliff, especially in the winter. Mary Eunice didn’t think too long on what those cans labelled turkey actually contained; they always made her stomach turn with nausea, and the patients left her more than one pile to clean up. *I’ll never have a holiday like that again.*

For a moment, her future flashed before her—many more of these Thanksgivings and Christmases and Easters and even Halloweens with Lana and Lois and Barb, carving a real turkey, baking a real pie, mashing real potatoes, the pleasant scent of food broiling in a homey kitchen, assured of the cleanliness of everything she consumed because she had made it herself with love in her heart. *Don’t think like that. This is temporary.* The stark reminder sent her sucking in a quick breath through her nose, a pain jabbing between her ribs. She couldn’t consider it, her future apart from Lana. *I’m here because God placed me here. He will guide me back to my path soon enough.*

She swallowed hard; everything inside her mouth had dried like a worm on a sidewalk. She had come here for a reason—a reason she had yet to discover—but she trusted her vows. The church would reclaim her. *I don’t belong with Lana.* Tears stung the backs of her eyes. God had chosen her. *God chose to put me here, too.*

The conundrum whirled inside her, eating her appetite into nothingness. A tender hand brushed against hers. She blinked once where she had stared blankly into the pot of mashed potatoes. “Are you okay?” Lana whispered, dark eyes round with concern. *I don’t know where I belong. I want to stay with you. Oh, you’re worrying over nothing. No one’s trying to drag you away.* Matthew 6:34. *Do not worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.* “Sister?” she prompted. Her thumb dragged over the back of Mary Eunice’s hand.

A smile crawled to her lips. “I’m fine,” she said. *It isn’t a lie. It’s true. I’m fine. There’s nothing wrong with me.* She cleared her throat and reached for the spoon in the mashed potatoes. “Do you want some potatoes?” Those dark eyes held her reflection where she did not deserve to see herself, unworthy of all Lana’s affection.

“I’m serious.” Lana squeezed her hand. Mary Eunice turned her hand to accept Lana’s, fingers tangling into one another’s valleys and mountains, their usual arrangement. “What’s the matter? You don’t look right.”

“I’m fine,” Mary Eunice repeated. She let a quiet chuckle ease from her lips, though it was reluctant to emerge from her. *Lord, give me strength and guide me. Let me place all of my trust in You to lead me to happiness if that is in my future. Vanquish my doubts. Let Lana know more joy in the future than she has known in the past—whether or not that includes me.* This I pray in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen. “Really.” Her heart lost its tight scrunching up inside of her. It relaxed with her prayer, the meditative power relaxing all of her concerns. “I’m very happy. With—With everything, right now.” She toyed with Lana’s hands where their two grips caught together, palm to palm, anxious sweats mingling in the heels of their hands. “I’ve never had anything like this before.”

The worry in the crinkles of Lana’s face dissipated, not completely, but enough. “I’m glad this is special for you.” Mary Eunice peeked past her, but Lois and Barb had entertained themselves at the dinner table, neither of them paying heed to the two in the kitchen. Lana rose onto her tiptoes and took Mary Eunice’s face between her hands to press a delicate kiss to her forehead. *Oh, I am so blessed.* Blush spread up her neck and encompassed her ears and her hairline. The heat set fire to her blood, made her want to grab Lana by the waist and kiss her—not a tender brush of mouth on cheek, but a real, fervent kiss so she could breathe the flames in her heart and lungs into Lana’s
I don’t think I’ve felt this way before. Her stomach flipped. I shouldn’t. It’s wrong. I want to kiss her, but not like that. Just regular, friend kisses. Little ones. Lana grinned. Mary Eunice wondered how much of her internal monologue her expression had betrayed. “C’mon.” Their hands didn’t touch again, but she followed Lana more faithfully than her own shadow back to the dining room table.

They sat down at the table, Mary Eunice across from Barb; they left a vacant seat in case Earl decided to show himself. Barb plunged her fork into the turkey. “Wait!” Lois interrupted. Lana and Barb both froze, forks in hand, while Mary Eunice paused in the middle of unfolding a napkin into her lap. “Aren’t we going to say grace?”

Three pairs of eyes wandered to Mary Eunice, Lois’s landing on her last as she realized the implications of her words. Uh-oh. The spotlight landed on her, framing her in the moment, a criminal caught in the action. Under the table, Gus brushed against her feet. His wet nose plunged into her lap in search of some treat. “You—You don’t have to on my account. I pray privately.” She allowed a small smile to crawl upon her lips and looked back to Lois, hoping to dissuade whatever had caused the outburst.

“But what kind of Thanksgiving is it if we don’t say grace? Get that sweet potato out of your mouth, Barbra!”

Barb swallowed. “It’s not in my mouth anymore.” Lois scowled. “Sweetie—We’re three dykes and a nun.”

“Sounds like the title of a pulp fiction piece,” muttered Lana.

“I’m just saying, prayer seems a little incongruous with this event, given the gathering of people we’ve managed to accumulate.”

Lois jutted out her lower jaw, somewhere between an obstinate locking of her teeth and a pout. “My family always says grace before a Thanksgiving meal, and they’re not even the Christmas-Easter type of people. We also go around and say one thing we’re thankful for.” She arched an eyebrow, looking from Barb to Lana to Mary Eunice and back again. “Surely you’ve got some kind of Thanksgiving tradition?”

Cleaning up vomit. Digging the old Christmas tree out of the attic with the ornaments. Skipping dinner. It’s any other day at Briarcliff. Mary Eunice shrugged and shook her head. None. None I’d care to replicate here, anyway. Lana, still clutching her fork tight in her hand, said, “Usually we get shit-faced and put up the Christmas tree after dinner and clean up the mess the next day.”

“Babe, you can say grace if you want to say grace, especially if it means I get to eat more of these damn delicious sweet potatoes without getting my head bitten off—”

“You really don’t have any Thanksgiving traditions? Not even going mudding through the woods? Or ice-fishing? Or breaking the wishbone? Or watching the turkey pardoning on the telly? Or the Thanksgiving Day Parade? You don’t do any of that?”

Lana exchanged a look with Mary Eunice across the table. “No,” Barb said. “C’mon, Lois, can we eat or not?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Right, right! Eat, I’m sorry.” She grabbed her own fork and plunged into the mashed potatoes without another blink of hesitation. Mary Eunice bowed her head, silent and subtle. Bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen. She made the Sign of the Cross and chopped up the turkey into smaller bits and pieces with her fork. The first bite, the ultimate test, passed by her lips and
warmed her tongue. Salty, tender, flaky—perfect. “Are we going to do something for Christmas, too?”

With a soft chuckle, Lana inclined an eyebrow. “We may well be eating the same food,” she teased, brushing Mary Eunice’s ankle with her foot under the table. “Given someone made enough to feed the royal family.”

Barb chuckled, and silence descended on the table; the air carried a certain heavy weight which Mary Eunice couldn’t place her finger on, but it tingled between all of them, lacing their breaths like carbon monoxide leaking into the air around them. Lois hummed an occasional greeting or musing. They stole glances between the two of them, Lois and Barb, each growing in hostility. Under the table, Gus straightened by Mary Eunice’s feet, perched on his haunches. She brushed her foot down his spine to soothe him. Lana’s gaze pierced her cheek; Mary Eunice faced her, a question quirked upon her eyebrows, but Lana reflected the same worried confusion. *It isn’t like either of them to be so quiet.*

“I just don’t want to be alone on Christmas, that’s all,” Lois whispered at long last, her fork sticking up from the turkey with a bit of fat dangling from its prongs. “I’m sorry if that makes me selfish.” Barb huffed, but she wound up choking on a green bean, and her eye-roll ended much more abruptly than she intended.

What? Mary Eunice surveyed Lois, lips pursing. Lana interrupted, “Of course not—” Mary Eunice reached to take Lois’s hand; her face crumpled into a silent sob hiccuping through parted lips. Tears slipped down her cheeks and puddled in the gravy. *Maybe Thanksgiving at Briarcliff wasn’t so horrible.* “What’s this about? What’s gotten into the two of you? This isn’t like you at all.” Lois used her other hand to muffle her mouth.

Oh, no, Lois, don’t cry. Barb carved holes in the side of Mary Eunice’s face, but she ignored her hostility as she scooted her chair nearer, meal forgotten. Lois dragged her into another passionate hug. She flopped into Mary Eunice’s lap and knotted her hands behind her neck, burying her face into her neck and releasing another faint whimper, muffled into Mary Eunice’s skin. “Barb? What’s the matter with her?” Lana pressed.

“Can’t we talk about this after we’ve eaten? Indigestion on Thanksgiving—”

“Barb is going to see her family on Christmas without me!” Lois wailed.

Lana’s eyes widened; Mary Eunice flinched at the loud words echoing right beside her ear, and she smoothed her hands up and down Lois’s back with more fervor, whispering, “Sh, Lois, it’s okay…” under her breath. *Don’t look at anyone.* She pinned her gaze on a particular lock of auburn hair and teased it under one of her index fingers, avoiding Lana and Barb like the plague.

“I did not say I was going without you! I said you could come with me! I don’t know what’s got you all bent out of shape about this! Jesus, Lois, can’t you put a lid on it for once?”

Lois whirled around in Mary Eunice’s lap. Her skirt had ridden up too high; she scrambled to flatten it back down, but she couldn’t where Lois perched on her knees. Lois grappled for one of her hands and planted it around her own middle.

What’s going on?

“Put a lid on it? Put a lid on it?” she repeated in a shriek. The sobbed words made the muscles in Mary Eunice’s shoulders tighten. She hiccuped in surprise. “My daddy pointed the barrel of a loaded gun at my chest! My own father! Don’t tell me to put a lid on it! Don’t tell me that! I don’t want to close the lid of your casket, Barb!”

*She’s afraid. She’s not upset. She’s scared.* Mary Eunice leaned forward and let her other hand catch around Lois’s middle, tugging her back down, but she paid no heed, so instead, she wiped the woman’s tear-streaked cheeks with one trembling hand. “Lois,” she whispered, “shouting isn’t going to help.”
“My family isn’t a crockpot of backwoods country chaos!” Barb snarled in return. “It is not my fault that your family is a load of racist fucks who couldn’t wait to marry you off to the first man who vied for your hand! You can’t punish me because you were born to a load shiteaters!”

Mary Eunice’s fingers dug into the white bandage on her arm. She caught the rubberband and thwacked it. The urge didn’t fade. She pulled it again. Again. Again. A steady rhythm; the smarting faded to numbness as her skin matched the rubber’s shade of pink. “You take that back! You take that back!” Barb curled her lip. “My family loved me! I didn’t do anything wrong!” Her chest and back and shoulders all heaved, unable to suck in enough deep breaths to keep herself steady. “Wendy is dead! I am not avoiding the grave of another person I love!”

“Wendy had nothing to do with her family, Wendy had to do with—” Barb cut herself off abruptly. 

No, no, no.

Mary Eunice pinched her eyes tight shut, screwing up her mouth, tilting everything down at the floor, but she could still hear the heads facing Lana, the eyes landing on her, the expectation and the tension lingering on the silence punctuated only by Lois’s muffled sobs and heavy breathing. Mary Eunice tugged the rubber band as far back as it would go. It snapped off of her wrist and landed in the floor.

Lana arched an eyebrow. “By all means, continue.” She pushed her chair back from the table and crossed her arms, lifting her head, jaw set. “I love hearing you yell at each other and use my dead girlfriend as leverage to win an argument. It’s truly a delight.”

Lois dashed her tears away with her fists. Her breath hitched in her throat. The erratic jerking of her back, colliding with Mary Eunice’s chest, betrayed her distress. One of her tight, stiff-fingered hands grappled for Mary Eunice’s again, seeking some recompense, some comfort. “Lana, we didn’t mean… Not like that, it’s not…” She drifted off, and before she could continue her thought, another weak sob overtook her, head bowing low; no amount of Mary Eunice’s calming strokes on the back of her hand, whispers of comfort to her ear, could ease her broken tears.

Barb pushed herself back from the table and stood. “This ends now.” Her fists struck down, held straight by her thighs; Mary Eunice’s heart skipped a beat, and sweat beaded on her brow. She cringed and shrank, both eyes locked on Barb as the brunette approached. No. Barb’s face flashed into Sister Jude’s, into Aunt Celest’s, into her own reflection with bright orange eyes. She ripped her hands from Lois’s and flung them up over face, expecting a backhand. Barb hesitated. Her eyes crinkled, brow quirking in concern. “I—”

Soft hands closed around Mary Eunice’s shoulders. She gasped in surprise, a muted sound, but Lana’s quiet voice interrupted her terror. “It’s okay.” Of course. Of course it’s okay. There’s nothing wrong. It’s just Barb. She pinched her eyes shut tight and inhaled. Her own lungs had become shaky, refusing to allow a full breath entrance or exit from her chest. “No one is going to hurt you.” Lois planted a sticky kiss on her cheek, expression watery and too weak to be deemed a smile.

Barb brushed by them in silence. “W-Where are you going?” Lois called after her. She shifted, standing on rubbery legs; Mary Eunice’s numb legs began to tingle with the circulation returning to them. “Barb?” Lois?

“Are you okay?” Lana whispered. Mary Eunice nodded, paying little heed to her concern as she stumbled to her feet. Lana caught her by the elbow to keep her upright. “Take it easy.”

“I’m fine.” Mary Eunice flexed her toes. They bent, some reluctantly, into the carpet, and then they retreated. “Just a little… a little numb below the waist, is all.” She smiled, raising an eyebrow. “It’s not every day a grown woman treats me like a mall Santa Clause.”
A weak chuckle rose from Lana’s lips, and she shook her head. “I’m sorry, I—”

“No, Barb, you can’t!” Lois shrieked. Lana and Mary Eunice broke apart and raced to the office where the two had disappeared. Barb had the phone pressed to her ear, sitting on Lana’s desk, all the papers scattered about, the typewriter keeping a precarious balance on the very edge of the table, threatening to spill over at any moment. Lois flopped back into the rolling chair, face buried in her hands. “Yes, can you connect me to Plattsburgh, New York? Thanks.” What is she doing? Mary Eunice strode to Lois in the chair, behind her, placing a hand on her shoulder. Lois put her own hand on top of it, holding it in place. “I need to reach the residence of Ludovic and Elaine Lacroix.”

Lana paled. “Oh, Barb, no… That’s not going to fix anything.” Barb set her jaw in silence, waiting for the line to pick up, letting quiet come between the four of them. “What do you think that’s going to do? What do you think you’re solving?”

Lois pled, “This isn’t what I want—really, you can go to Christmas. I won’t go, I can stay here, or I can stay at home, you can see them without me—please, don’t! I don’t want this!”

“I do.”

The line picked up. “Hello?” The muffled female voice came across the speaker, just loud enough for all of them to make it out.

All activity in the room died. Lois’s hand froze in Mary Eunice’s grip, all rigid, her face screwing up like a spelunker walking out of a cave and into the sun. “Hey, Mom, it’s Barb.” Oh no. A cold stone dropped into the pit of Mary Eunice’s stomach. No, she can’t be doing this.

“Mom, actually, there’s something we need to talk about, if you’ve got a few minutes. Dad, too, if he’s close by.”

A momentary silence greeted her, followed by, “Of course, sweetie. Ludovic! It’s Barb! She wants to talk to us! C’mon, the pie can wait.” A male voice rumbled in the background, indistinct to the listeners but clear to Barb, whose ear was pressed to the telephone. Her throat flexed with a tough swallow. “Alright, baby, we’re both here. What’s up? Is something wrong?”

Barb snorted a slight chuckle, raising her eyebrows. “No, no—Nothing’s wrong. I just haven’t been completely honest with the two of you, or with anyone, and I think it’s time to set things right.”

Her mother laughed, anxiety punctuating it. “Don’t be silly, baby, everything’s right. What’s this great lie you’ve been hiding from us? Do you have a secret boyfriend? Is he a Jew? We won’t judge you, you know, we’re not that type of people—your uncle Peter was in that war, and he could tell you how bad it was. We would never wish anything like that on anyone—”

“Mom.” The frivolous female voice, flattering the air with its hysterical giggles, died out at Barb’s sharp word. “I don’t have a secret boyfriend,” she said, slow and strong, powerful in every shift of her tongue and her lips. “I’m going to tell you. I’m not telling a joke. I’m being serious.”
“Of—Of course, Barb, we wouldn’t expect anything else.”

“I am in love.” She paused for a moment, and then she continued, “I am in love with my roommate, Lois, and I have been for fifteen years, since we shared an apartment in college.” She cleared her throat, but she didn’t continue speaking. She let her words crackle over the line and waited with the utmost patience, not a tremble upon her lip or a wrinkle upon her brow. She was at ease in a way Mary Eunice would never have expected.

When the silence stretched on so long, Mary Eunice feared Barb’s mother had fainted on the other end of the line, she answered, “Lois—Lois. Lois.” She repeated the name a few more times. Each repetition made Lois squeeze Mary Eunice’s hand tighter until she gripped with a bruising vice to the bone. “Lois, the— the dead baby Lois? That one?”

Barb brought a hand to her temple, massaging it. “She can hear you, Mom.” Lois relinquished Mary Eunice’s hand to cover her own face again, hiding the reddening cheeks and ceaseless tears. How heartless must someone be? Mary Eunice’s chest ached. She massaged Lois’s shoulders with gentle hands. Lana flanked her and placed a hand on Lois’s shoulder. The other arm hooked around Mary Eunice’s waist. Lana. Her presence alone eased Mary Eunice’s heart, the tension blooming there. The soft warmth of their bodies allowed her to lower her head and calm the racing of her frantic heart. Lana can make this better.

“No—No. It can’t be. You told us—” The mother’s voice cracked over the telephone, not with a faulty telephone wire, but with the horrible shaking voice of a broken heart. “You told us Lois got married—You told us she was married four years ago, and you were her maid of honor. I remember, because you missed Easter. It was Grandma Margot’s last Easter, and you weren’t there, and—and just a few weeks ago!” Her sniveling interrupted her words. “Just a few weeks ago, you had to leave early, because Lois’s husband was out of state, and she had two sick children, and she wanted your help—”

“No, Mom. No. Everything I’ve ever told you about Lois is a lie. I missed Easter, four years ago, because she was sick, and I needed to stay and take care of her. And I left Dad’s birthday party early because her family found out about us, and they were threatening to hurt her. So I had to go pick her up from Portland. We’ve been together forever.”

They paused. A few faint squeaks came from the line, the dark rumble of her father’s voice indiscernible for the listeners. They spoke in hushed words, enough for Barb to lift her eyes skyward. God, please, don’t let Barb’s parents lash out at her. Let them show her what unconditional love family is meant to hold. Don’t let their minds change about her. She’s the same wonderful woman they’ve loved until now. The woman cleared her throat. “Honey, you must be terribly confused right now. Something—Something must’ve happened. You’re—” She broke off in the anxious chuckles again. “You’re not making any sense, sweetheart. Where are you? Are you safe? Hold on, sweetheart—We’ll send someone to come get you, baby, and bring you home, and take you to a doctor to straighten things out—”

“I’m not confused, Mom. I’m telling you the truth. I’m a lesbian.” The voice on the other end of the phone hissed in response, like Barb had set a hot prod against her skin and left it there to form a brand. “A dyke,” Barb said, spitting this word. “And I have been since the day I was born. Nothing has changed about me. You just didn’t know.”

“Uh, no—no, no. You weren’t born this way. You’re—You’re a good, Christian girl, Barbra, and your father and I are going to send someone to come get you. I’m sure you’re confused, something must’ve happened—was it something at work? Is that what’s going on? Was it a man? Did a man hurt you?”

“No one hurt me, Mom. Nothing happened. Fifteen years ago, I fell in love with an amazing
woman, and nothing can change my mind. I love her, and I will for the rest of my life.” She cleared her throat, interrupting her mother’s attempt to cut in. “I know you were still holding out for me to find a man, and to marry, and to give you the grandchildren you want, but I—I’ve decided it’s time to tell you those things aren’t in my future. Lois is. You can take that or leave it. I’m going to support the woman I love.”

“Barb,” her mother implored, “you’re just a late bloomer! You’ll find love! You don’t need to settle for—for some skank from Maine—”

“I’m thirty-five years old, and if you call my girlfriend anything derogatory like that again, you have my permission to write me out of the will.”

Her father took the phone. His voice bledd through the air, clear now. “Don’t talk to your mother that way!” he snapped. “She wants to protect you. She wants to keep you from making some horrible mistake. She has given every breath in her body to you, I will not allow anyone to disrespect my wife in that way, especially my own daughter!”

Barb chuckled, a wry, empty sound. “If someone called Mom a skank, you’d have a head mounted on your wall, but I’m not allowed to defend my wife from slander, I see how it is—”

“You don’t have a wife. You have a—a perversion. A fetish. Honestly, I can’t—I can’t believe you would do this to us. How dare you equate whatever—whatever weird kink you’re exercising to what your mother and I have. It will never be the same. It’s impossible. You—you’re a disgrace to this family.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

Lois lunged out of the rolling office chair before Lana or Mary Eunice could restrain her. She snatched the phone of Barb’s hand just as the other began to drop it back on the cradle. “Fuck you!” she shrieked, her voice mangled by the tears pouring from her eyes. Barb cringed and fought to reclaim the telephone, but Lois smacked her hands away. “Barb is not a disgrace! Barb is the best thing that has ever happened to me, or to you, or to anybody who has had the honor of knowing her, and if you can’t see her for the wonderful, perfect woman she is, just because she loves me and not some man who would break her spirit and wear her down, then you don’t deserve to call her your daughter—” She hiccuped, but it didn’t stop her. “You don’t deserve to know her at all! Fuck you! Fuck all of you to hell!” She slammed the phone back into the cradle.

Barb slid off of the desk, pushing the papers back into a neater stack but not adjusting them to their former organization. “Baby.” She caught Lois around the waist and tugged her in for a hug, and Lois caved, resting her forehead against Barb’s shoulder. “It’s okay, baby,” she soothed. “We’re gonna be okay.”

Her muffled sobs had worn themselves out, so within moments, she fell silent, and quiet painted the canvas blank and white again. Lana shuffled closer beside Mary Eunice, brushed the backs of their hands against one another without the fingers tangling, the simple touch enough for each of them to soothe their own worries. Lana is the panacea for all ills. Dark eyes met pale. I wish I could kiss her right now. She bent her index finger outward, using its knuckle to trace patterns over the back of Lana’s hand, trailing all the sinew and veins there. “Is there a Bible verse for this?” Lana asked, her lips curled up at one corner, a lopsided half-smile which turned Mary Eunice’s abdomen into a hive of bees, all buzzing around in the inside, beating against the walls in search of an escape.

Mary Eunice licked her lips. She needed only a moment to consider before she spoke to them, scarcely thinking of her words. “First Timothy, 5:8. ‘But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.’” She
remembered the verse well; Aunt Celest had always spoken it to her as an excuse, a reason for why she had chosen to take Mary Eunice away from the orphanage and brought her back to Boston in spite of her destitute situation. She took great pride in reminding Mary Eunice that she was a burden to the family, that she had only been adopted out of the Christlike nature of Aunt Celest’s heart. She lied to me. She cast her eyes downward, trying to shove those thoughts far away. Why did her mind always wander when she didn’t intend it to leave the point of focus?

Lana squeezed the roughened heel of her hand, gaining her attention. She lifted her head to glance sideways at her, surprised at the sudden contact. Lana’s smile grew fuller, less wry and sarcastic. “You really do have a verse for everything.” They both faced Lois and Barb, sitting there in silence, leaning on one another, hands knotted like strings tied by a child who hadn’t yet learned the proper way. “I’m sorry, Barb. You didn’t have to do that.”

Barb pressed a tender kiss to Lois’s temple. “No. I wanted to. It was better this way, on my terms.” She inclined her eyebrows. “I was the first one, of all of us, to figure things out. It’s not fair for me to keep holding onto my closet with my family where everyone else lost theirs.”

“Just because you’re better at being discreet than the rest of us,” Lois mumbled. She licked her lips, lifting her head from Barb’s shoulder, but her expression was a soft smile, not accusatory. “And lying, apparently. Really, married? Two kids? I can’t believe they bought it. Even not knowing me… Why did they think we were still living together?”

“I told them your husband traveled for work, so I stayed with you and helped you care for them with your—you’re allegedly frail health. You needed help keeping house and providing.” Lois’s eyebrows knitted together in mingled awe and confusion. Barb fidgeted, shaking her head as she rubbed her hand against Lois’s, palm to palm, skin grinding against one another. “I can’t believe she called you a skank.” Barb paused a moment. “Or dead baby Lois, for that matter.”

“Glad to know I’m so memorable with your family,” Lois replied in a dry voice. She opened her arms. “Come here, girls,” she invited. Lana approached and fell into their tight embrace, allowing Barb to sweep her into a hug fit for queens. Mary Eunice took a step forward.

Lois, however, had no part in it. She left one arm open. “Come on, sis. You’re one of us now.” She beckoned Mary Eunice with fingers curling into the air, the invitation growing in size until she succumbed to its temptation and buried herself in the bundle of women, all the scents and skins and clothing mingling, hands brushing up against her and arms wrapping around her and comfort provided through the sheer intimacy of the crushing nearness of her friends. Lips smacked her face and her hair. Hands smoothed down the wrinkles in her sweater and her skirt. “I know I already adopted you as my sister, but now Barb is sisterless, too, so—assuming you have enough room…” Barb grinned, broad and white and not the least bit threatening.

“At her affirmation, Barb caught her by the cheeks and planted a hot kiss to her mouth, a loud smack elicited by her lips. Mary Eunice squeaked in astonishment at the rough texture of Barb’s mouth, her chapped lips having none of the strawberry chapstick flavor of Lana’s but instead the rancid reek of an ashtray on her breath. Barb’s large hands framed her face, a palm on either cheek. Blue eyes met hers, almost afraid of what she might find there, but Barb held no lust for her, only the tender affection of friendship held in her gaze. “I love you already.” Mary Eunice collapsed into a hug; Barb clapped her on the back, and her strong arms were a fortress of safety.
The suddenness of it all shocked her, left her stiff, but she softened into the embrace when her heart ceased its rapid pulse and allowed her to relax. She rested her chin on Barb’s shoulder.

Lana eased between them. “What am I? Chopped liver?” One hand rested on Mary Eunice’s waist. She’s protecting me. She thinks I’m afraid. But Mary Eunice feared Barb, now, no more than she feared Lois or Lana or Gus. Barb would never hurt her. They had made room in their lives to accommodate her, regardless of if she belonged or not. Nonetheless, she appreciated Lana’s presence, the steadfast way she remained at her side and provided more support than Mary Eunice had ever known from anyone before in her life.

“Oh, Lana, you’re groovy.” Lois tugged her back into the cinnamon roll of collective affection once more, giggling. “You’re our sister, too. I assumed you knew. That’s been established for years now.” She kissed Lana on the cheek with a loud, wet smooch. “We really fucked up dinner, didn’t we?” She sniffled, wiping her snot with the back of her hand. Lana took a handkerchief from the top drawer of her desk and handed it to her. “Oh, thanks.” Lois blew her nose into the cloth with a honking nose, an elephant expelling the contents of its trunk.

“Speak for yourself.” Barb straightened. “That’s some damn good food in there, and now that none of us are going to have indigestion, I plan to eat it.” She retreated from the mashed group of bodies on bodies, heat on heat, skin on skin. “Dibs on the new bottle of wine!”

She raced out of the office, Gus chasing after her, nipping at her heels with his tail a crooked, skinny flag streaming out in the air behind him. The doorbell rang. Gus whirled around; his game of chase crashed to a halt, and instead, he barked at the front door. “Oh, c’mon! Can’t we catch a break? We just want to eat turkey without anymore disturbances,” Barb griped.

Lana peeked through the hole on the door. “It’s Earl.” She unlocked the door, each lock clicking to freedom before she tugged it open. “Happy Thanksgiving!” she greeted.

“Happy Thanksgiving!” Earl replied with a broad grin, stepping into the house. Just behind him, a teenage boy followed; he bore a thick shock of mousy brown hair and had a smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose, bright green eyes behind wire-framed glasses, and ears protruding from the sides of his head like a monkey’s. “I hope you don’t mind my plus one. This is Christopher. Chris, these are my friends—Lana, Barb, Lois, and Sister Mary Eunice.” He blushed and lifted an open palm in greeting. “Chris is staying with me for awhile, until he gets on his feet. It’s his first Thanksgiving without his family, so I thought it was best to give him some sense of community.”

Lois grinned. “Don’t worry. It’s my and Barb’s first Thanksgiving without family, too.” She patted him on the shoulder. “C’mon, let’s fix you a plate of food. Now, Sister Mary Eunice made some sweet tea, but it is some kind of sweet. If you’re from anywhere above the Mason-Dixon line, it’ll give you a tummy ache for days. Where are you from?”

“Right here in Boston, ma’am.”

“Oh, dear Jesus, don’t call me ma’am. Call me Lois.”

As they walked away, Lana and Mary Eunice lingered by Earl. His gray eyebrows furrowed in concern. “What’s up with Lois? Her eyes are all bloodshot…” He glanced from one to the other, but Mary Eunice looked to Lana, expecting her to hold a more eloquent answer. “You all seem rather tense. Is something the matter?”

“Barb just broke up with her family.” Lana crossed her arms around her chest, a frown troubling her mouth. “I don’t think they expected the holiday to treat them well, since everything with Lois…” She drifted off, shrugging.
“Right, right. The first holiday is always the hardest. They’ll figure it out.” Earl patted Lana on the
shoulder, but she shrugged his hand off of her, eyes widening. Mary Eunice stepped nearer to her,
her own hand shifting to swat it away if it lingered. “Right. Sorry.” He cleared his throat and
withdrew the offending limb. “Now, you never did tell any of us what happened with Rachel.”

Lana set her jaw. “What did she have to say about it?”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry, Lana. I’m pretty sure she told the whole truth. She gave me and
Jasmine an earful about never trying to have sex with a nun.” She snorted and rolled her eyes
skyward. “I don’t think she really understood that celibacy is part of the whole nun contract.
Anyway, it’s water under the bridge, now. She wound up leaving with Katherine last Friday, and
we haven’t seen either of them since. She’s just Katherine’s type.”

“Are you all coming?” Barb called. “I’m not waiting another moment to eat this turkey, and if
you’re not in here by the time we’re ready for pumpkin pie, you won’t get any!”

“Well, that would be an absolute travesty, wouldn’t it?” Earl nodded once to Lana and Mary
Eunice and headed past them into the kitchen to fill his plate.

They all settled around the dining room table again, this time with ease in the air; Lois laughed
with Barb, and she hovered close beside Chris until he loosened his tongue. “It’s like liquefied
sugar,” he said in regards to the sweet tea Mary Eunice had brewed.

Earl sat beside him. “Sounds perfect.” He took a long sip of it. “Christ, that’s heavenly. I didn’t
know people could still make sweet tea like this. That’s some good, southern stuff. Good job,
kid.” He winked to Mary Eunice. How does he like it? It tastes like drinking out of a bowl of
sugar.

A pink blush crept up her neck, and she murmured her thanks for his compliment,
nonetheless. Lana had assured her Earl would like the ultra-sweet tea, even if she couldn’t
swallow it herself without sending prayers of repentance.

Lana lifted her own glass of iced tea. “Don’t slather on the praise too generously. She told me she
can’t drink any of it unless she wants to wind up in confession.” Earl choked while Lana drank
from her glass.

“I don’t understand any of you,” Lois said, shrugging. “If I drank something like that, my stomach
would hurt for weeks.”

“Some people like sweet tea. Some people like squished sour grapes,” Barb said, putting her glass
of wine down on the table. “And some people like both, and some people—like me—would
rather drink straight out of the gravy boat if it was socially acceptable, because that’s some damn
good gravy.”

Earl rolled his eyes at her antics; she poured more generous gravy across her mashed potatoes, and
Lois pushed her plate nearer for Barb to take them. “I feel like that all was some metaphorical
hogwash related to the state of human sexuality, wherein sweet tea is lesbians, wine is gays, the
gravy boat is a vow of celibacy for the nuns present.”

Oh, dear. I’m the gravy boat. Mary Eunice’s cheeks flushed at the prospect. Lana arched an
eyebrow and asked, “What about the heterosexuals?”

He blinked in feigned astonishment. “What on earth is a heterosexual?” The whole table burst into
a fit of giggles.

Mary Eunice stared down at her untouched pile of baked beans. She didn’t like baked beans, but
Chris had begun to tear them apart with his fork, his spoon managed to seize the green beans in a
syncopated rhythm, taking a turn with the red beans and a turn with the green. In spite of his complaint about the sugary nature of the tea, he continued to slurp it like a famished, parched horse seeking some reward for a long day of difficult labor. His entire plate of food vanished behind a curtain, more effective than any magician’s trick. “Help yourself to more,” Mary Eunice invited, glad to change the subject.

“Oh, thank you, Sister, but I’m stuffed.” Chris leaned back in his chair and smiled a lopsided grin; he had a row of crooked teeth, the top string missing one of the top front teeth. The gum still dribbled a hint of blood, like he’d recently lost it. “Why don’t you wear your habit?” he asked, an afterthought. Lana swung around to fix a glare on him, a snake rearing up to defend its territory and protect itself, and he straightened in his seat, stammering through a clumsy defense. “I—I mean, I was just wondering, it’s none of my business, it’s just—my parents were Catholic, so I was just—it’s just curiosity, killed the cat, you know, I didn’t mean—” His face grew redder with every passing moment, each syllable making him sink deeper into the wooden chair.

Mary Eunice smiled, eager to end his suffering. “No, no—it’s fine. I don’t bite.” Lana, on the other hand… She glanced to Lana out of the corner of her eye. Lana met her gaze, arching an eyebrow in challenge. She chuckled, making eye contact with Chris again. “Most nuns, Sisters, and priests have at least two habits—a solemn habit and a working habit, one for worship and one for service. I only have one here, so I save it for worship.”

Lois perked up. “Are nuns and Sisters two different things?” she asked. Her lips pursed; she had a dribble of gravy on her upper lip which Mary Eunice could only mentally describe as downright adorable. She dabbed it away with her napkin.

“Yes—well, technically, but they’re interchangeable in common language.” Everyone regarded her with some semblance of interest. The spotlight made Mary Eunice’s chest quiver with nervousness. She didn’t get the opportunity to share her faith often, but this felt more like preaching than sharing, all the eyes upon her, some curious, Chris’s holding the most intrigue, Lana’s bright with love which warmed her blood where it coursed through her veins. Lana brought heat to all of her extremities. “A nun enters a cloistered order—an enclosed order—with a life centered on the monastery and prayer, and she takes solemn vows. A Sister lives within the world as a missionary, and she ministers within the world. She takes simple vows, instead. I belong to a cloistered order, an abbey, where I lived until the Mother Superior appointed me to Briarcliff, because it’s under church ownership, so I’m a nun—but really, there’s no important difference.”

“What’s the difference between solemn vows and simple vows?” Chris asked. By now, Lana had leaned forward, holding her chin in her hand, and Lois regarded her with equal interest; only Earl looked slightly perturbed at the intense religious talk. Mary Eunice tried hard not to look at him too closely. Barb worked at her noodles with an eager fork, paying no heed to the table’s conversation as she filled her wine glass once again.

“Yes. You sound brilliant, Mary, she chided herself internally, and she swallowed the large lump in her throat to continue speaking. “At their basis, the vows are the same. They’re all founded on poverty, chastity, and obedience. And every order’s vows are a little different. But the biggest difference is that nuns surrender all of their—our—worldly possessions to the church in favor of leading a life without material wealth. A sister has the right to keep her patrimony as long as she doesn’t have revenue from it.”

“I never knew any of that,” Lois said. “You’ve got a lot of stuff in your head. You’re like a church index!” Mary Eunice ducked her head, abashed at the comment. Compliment? Yes, for a nun, a church index was a good thing. “You’ve got a really good memory, don’t you? It seems like you remember everything.”
“Oh—no, I’m not very smart at all.” Mary Eunice shook her head. Her belly was full, but she kept spooning up the mashed potatoes and vegetables in front of her. She hadn’t had the luxury of tasting such a smorgasbord of food ever before in her life, and while she regretted the sin of gluttony, she knew the leftovers would overwhelm them if they didn’t make a serious attempt to knock them out. “All my teachers in school said so. The superior nuns, too, for that matter.” She inclined her eyebrows and glanced down at the noodles spinning around her fork. “It’s just repetition. I remember things I do a lot—pray the rosary, the common Bible passages, that sort of thing. It’s really not anything special.”

Lana scoffed. “Please. You could narrate what we ate for dinner every day for the last three weeks.” She poured more tea into her glass.

Snorting, Barb wiped her mouth with her napkin. “Well, Lana, you see, people who cook tend to remember what they cooked. People who eat just assume it magically appears in their plate, but there’s this whole, memorable process. You wouldn’t know, seeing as you can’t cook without starting a fire…”

“Lana can cook!” Mary Eunice defended in earnest, a frown pursing her lips. It’s not Lana’s fault she’s not a good cook. “She’s writing the cooking column again, and we’ve only had our eyebrows singed once.” One fire in two days isn’t swell, Mary. She opted not to call out that particular detail of the story; she still didn’t know what Lana had done, but when they noticed smoke billowing out of the kitchen, they had to fight to eliminate the flames on the remains of the casserole and scrape the melted pan out of the oven.

“Really?” Lois swung back to Lana. “The cooking column? Again? What prompted that? I thought you were glad to be rid of it.”

“And it’s not like any of your recipes were good.” A series of glares flicked to Barb. She shrugged. “Sorry. But I’m not wrong.”

Though Lana had cleared her plate, she stared at it rather than meeting the eyes of anyone at the table. “Oh, I—I met someone who said he liked it. The column, I mean. Emmerman jumped on it. He’ll take anything from me, now. I just need to keep him eating out of my hand until my book is ready for publication. He’s hoping I’ll give him a percentage for hooking me up with a publishing agent.”

“Will you?” Earl asked.

She snorted. “No. He runs the Globe. He doesn’t need anything else.”

Lois sucked her lower lip, deep in thought for a moment, before she piped up from her silent reverie of consideration. “I think it’s his fault.” What? Mary Eunice blinked at her in surprise. “Walter Emmerman. Everything that happened—it’s on him.” She pursed her lips. Mary Eunice had only met Walt once; Lana didn’t like him, but he had seemed nice enough to her, at least for a man. Dr. Thredson seemed nice enough, too. “No—hear me out, really. If he would’ve just given you a good story instead of being a sexist fuck—” Chris winced at the expletive. Mary Eunice didn’t blink. “—then none of this would’ve happened. You never would’ve gone to the asylum, and Wendy would still be here, and you could be writing about—”

“One of this right now?” Lana interrupted.

“I’m sorry,” Chris said, “you all lost me. What are we talking about?”

He doesn’t know? Mary Eunice regarded him with wild, wide eyes, bewildered by each passing exchange. “Nothing, son, nothing,” Earl muttered. He reached under the table and patted Chris on
Nothing for you to worry about.” He cleared his throat and pushed back from the table. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m more than ready for some pumpkin pie.”

Mary Eunice flung herself from the table to get the pie, stifling the tremble in her hands. Her skin erupted into pink expanse of tingles once again. She sliced up the pie into equal sized pieces and took it to the table. Silence had swallowed all of them, Lana facing forward with a straight jaw, Barb poking the empty bottom of her plate, Earl leaning back and crossing his arms, Lois and Chris both staring at Mary Eunice like she held some secret key to reopening the conversation. This isn’t right. This isn’t how it should be. She had never imagined it would be so uncomfortable. Placing the pie in the middle of the table, she let everyone serve themselves a slice. After Chris lifted a slice into his plate, she cleared her throat. “Uh—Chris, how—how old are you?”

His eyes widened like a deer frozen in headlights. “Er—I’m—uh—I’m twenty-one.” Lois and Barb both turned their heads, Lana’s gaze flitting from the opposite wall to his cheek. “Twenty,” he amended, fingers drumming on the table. When none of their gazes fell away, he squeaked, “Nineteen?” like a student guessing the right answer to a question.

“I feel like we’re in that Daisy commercial,” Barb deadpanned, arching an eyebrow at him in challenge. “Counting down to the nuclear apocalypse. C’mon, kid, out with it.”

He sighed and averted his eyes. “I’m sixteen.”

“I guess Sister Mary Eunice isn’t the baby of the family anymore.” Lois winked at her, reaching to squeeze her hand in reassurance. The baby? I’ve never been the youngest before. She couldn’t decide if she liked it or not, this feeling settling in the pit of her stomach and smothering her chest, the sensation of having a support system. “This is some really good pie,” she added, and Mary Eunice thanked her in turn.

Once they had finished their pie, Lois and Barb rose to say farewell. Mary Eunice collected the dirty dishes in the kitchen and filled tupperware bowls with all of the food to send home with them, gradually watching the pile diminish. She passed them to Barb. Lois wrapped her in a tight hug and kissed her on the cheek. “We’ll see you on Christmas,” she promised, “if not before then.” Then they swallowed Lana into their deep hugs and affection, vowing the same to her, which she reciprocated, but she had an empty look set in her eyes, set in the marrow of her bones which no amount of friendly wishes could erase.

Earl and Chris prepared to leave next. “Go ahead out to the car, son.” Chris obeyed, thanking them for keeping his company and stepping out into the wintry evening air, fat flakes falling from the sky and sprinkling on the brown grass. “Lana, I’m sorry I didn’t tell him.” Mary Eunice saw herself reflected in his eyes like she had imagined her father would look at her, if she could ever capture his face in her memory.

She crossed her arms, back straight, jaw set. “Why would you? It’s none of his business.”

He shook his head, hand flying to his temple. “No, it—it isn’t that. I mean, you’re right. Too many people know your business, but that’s not why.” He cleared his throat. “I didn’t expect it to get brought up—”

“Yes, God forbid someone should talk about Wendy on a holiday. Wouldn’t that just kill the mood?” She’s about to panic. Mary Eunice shuffled nearer. Gus, too, could smell the anxiety leaking through Lana’s sneered words. He butted his head against her thigh and whined. Mary Eunice didn’t dare reach for Lana’s hand, but she hovered, ready to do whatever Lana needed or requested of her to help her. Lana closed her eyes and swallowed hard. “I didn’t expect it, either. Lois has the social sense of a stone.”
“Do you remember when you were seventeen, and you didn’t know where you fit into the world? If it would ever have a place for you? When you were eighteen, and your parents caught you and threw you out? And you wondered if you could possibly have a place in society if you didn’t even have a place in your own family? You were in my class—you were my student. I saw it in you, when you decided you were going to carve out a place for yourself if the world didn’t have a seat ready-made.”

“Of course I remember.”

“How would you have felt, then, if one of the first people you met in the community told you she’d been tortured with conversion therapy and her partner murdered for who she loved?” Lana blinked up to him in astonished silence. “It would’ve closeted you for a long time. Maybe forever. Lana, it’s a—a really dangerous world. We’re being killed out there, and nobody gives a shit. Christopher just got tossed out by his parents, got the shit kicked out of him, and I don’t want to scare him anymore than I already have to. I want him to feel as safe as possible. It’s hard enough.”

Her throat flexed with a tight gulp. “I understand.”

Earl’s whiskery gray face curled upward in a sympathetic smile. “Thank you. Happy Thanksgiving.” He nodded to Mary Eunice, giving a quiet, “Sister,” before he stepped out into the cold. Lana closed the door behind him. The locked clicked into place. She reached up to the coat rack, took her purse from it, and opened it in search of her bottle of Valium. Mary Eunice waited in silence for her to swallow a single pill. Her own palms had gained a gratuitous layer of sweat. She waited for Lana to give her some cue, some signal, some order for her to follow.

Lana sank onto the couch, worn and weary in all the lines of her face, and she patted the spot beside her in invitation. Eager as a dog, she plopped beside her, pushing a prompting smile onto her lips. Brown eyes met hers once. A single tear slipped from Lana’s eye, and Mary Eunice lifted a hand to brush it away, but Lana caught her hand in the air and brought it back down to her lap. She tugged up the sleeve and examined the pink skin where Mary Eunice had broken the rubber band off of her wrist. “You popped your skin raw,” she whispered in a hoarse, broken voice, empty as one without a soul. In her lap, she spread out Mary Eunice’s hand, stretching out the digits long and massaging the calloused heel of the palm. “You have such beautiful hands.” Mary Eunice’s gaze didn’t waver from Lana’s face, where more tears slid down, begging for Mary Eunice to wipe them away. “Can I ask something of you?”

“Anything,” Mary Eunice promised without hesitance.

A tiny smile flexed Lana’s lips, a hiccupsed chuckle of surprise. “Kiss me?”

_You don’t have to tell me twice._ Mary Eunice leaned forward, slow and questioning, and caught the underside of Lana’s jaw in her left hand. She paused when Lana’s breath, exhaled cool from her nostrils, wafted across her face, and then she allowed her lips to cover Lana’s, delicate and hesitant and sweet. _I love you_. She wanted her kiss to say it. She wanted every touch she placed on Lana’s scarred body to have the sheer adoration she gave to Lana pressed into her skin. She wanted Lana to feel like nothing less than a goddess, and the space between them would have carry every praise she gave to Lana’s name. Tilting her head, their mouths melted into one another, one catching the other’s lower lip and sucking upon it. _What time is it? What is time?_ The seconds on the clock slowed.

Of its own volition, Mary Eunice’s hand slipped back into Lana’s hair, stroking it, scraping the scalp with her short fingernails. Lana parted her lips. A soft moan rose from her, a pleasure sound, and she lifted her head away from Mary Eunice’s for a moment. Their lips detached. _What? Did I do something wrong?_ She almost asked the question before the wide expanse of neck caught her eye. _It’s an invitation_. She pressed her lips to the hard piece of Lana’s thick
jawbone again, eager to remedy her moment of confusion, trailing a string of wet kisses down the
sharp curves of her neck. Her pulse throbbed against Mary Eunice’s lips and tongue. Soft grunts
and hums of approval encouraged her through her blindness; Lana had no trouble directing her to
the most sensitive places. At her pulse point, Mary Eunice scraped her teeth, seeking adventure,
and Lana’s whole body quivered into a gasp.

A smattering of kisses decorated her head, whatever Lana could reach, but Mary Eunice paid
them little attention. The hands, though, the hands. Lana’s hands roamed her torso on top of her
sweater, tracing her waist, her ribs, her back, smoothing over her hair with long, luxurious
movements. Mary Eunice suckled gently upon the place where Lana’s blood coursed just beneath
the skin. Fingers plucked at the hem of her sweater before sliding underneath it. Oh, my word.
Lana’s hands were on her body—her bare body, her bare skin, the canvas which she had
preserved for God, seeing it unfit, impure for anyone else. Her breath hitched at the sensation of
cool fingertips caressing all the blank places no one had ever touched before. “L-Lana,” she
stammered, breathless, voice brushing all of the saliva-streaked areas of Lana’s neck.

Brown eyes landed on her from above, frozen with a form of fear. Lana withdrew. Her hands
slipped back down Mary Eunice’s body without touching her skin. “Sorry—” She shrank, trying
to make herself small and unthreatening, a dog rolling belly up to demonstrate its friendliness.
“Sorry, I shouldn’t—”

“No, I—I don’t want you to stop.” I could never fear you. I could never regard you as anything
other than perfect. “I like it—I like when you touch me.”

Lana lifted her eyes to Mary Eunice’s, conflict lying deep in there, some thoughts she didn’t give
voice to. Mary Eunice cupped her hip, keeping herself open. She wasn’t afraid. She didn’t want
Lana to think she was. Lana pressed another delicate kiss to her mouth, warm, each breathing in
the other’s air. She pulled back, but after a moment of consideration, they locked again. What is
this? part of Mary Eunice asked while the other part declared, Who cares? Lana made her feel like
literal magic bloomed in the air between them; it crackled like electricity, as bright as she had ever
seen God’s light, illuminating their very souls.

This time, Lana peppered her neck with a string of kisses, teasing the more sensitive areas. She
fought to restrain every sound threatening to burble from her throat. A low hum built inside her,
and Lana embraced the vibrating box in her throat with her curled tongue slicking up her skin. A
firm hand pressed to Mary Eunice’s shoulders, a direction, an instruction; she obeyed, sprawling
on her back on the couch. Lana folded on top of her, bracing herself on her forearms. None of her
weight landed on Mary Eunice’s body, and she lingered there for a moment, regarding Mary
Eunice with a soft affection.

She swept her gaze over Lana once, all of her, her beauty, her grace. But her heart burst in protest.
The licentious heat between her legs blossomed, the pit of her stomach disintegrating into a nest of
wasps, and her chest hitched in surprise at the anxiety burning its way through her body. She
clamped her legs together. The hand bracing itself on the edge of the couch balled into a fist,
clutching the end of the cushion. “I—I—” What’s wrong with me? What’s happening? Her whole
face flamed with shame. What was so wrong with this? She loved Lana, and she loved the
feelings Lana gave to her, and she loved touching Lana’s body in the same way. But flashes of
memory charged through her mind, the things she had read in Wendy’s journal—the way Wendy
lay underneath Lana, all too parallel too this moment.

Don’t be silly. You’re not having sex. Lana would never ask that of you. And, like she read Mary
Eunice’s mind and sought to assuage all of her fears, Lana lowered herself, resting her head on her
chest. Mary Eunice wrapped her arms around Lana in return, cradling her like a child. You just
kiss sometimes. That’s it. You’re friends. She rubbed Lana’s back with her hands, each one
drawing circles going opposite directions. “I love you, Lana,” she whispered.

“I love you, too.” Lana’s arms reached up to loop around her neck.

Gus whined, starting from the rug where he had lain down, and pushed his cold nose against Mary Eunice’s cheek. She grimaced and wriggled away. Lana laughed. “Gus loves you, too!” she chimed, all bright. The emptiness faded from her eyes. She lingered just a breath longer before she rose, tugging Mary Eunice up with her. “C’mon,” she said. “Let’s put up the Christmas tree.”

“Do I get to put the angel on top?” Mary Eunice teased in return.

“You are the angel on top.” Lana winked. Mary Eunice burst into a fit of pink giggles. Lana placed a record on the machine so the sweet voices of Simon and Garfunkel rolled forth, proclaiming the gospel. “C’mon, sunshine. Tis the season.”

_Tis the season._ Mary Eunice had never entered the Christmas season with fewer thoughts of Jesus on her mind. “Of course.” She opened the nearest box and pulled free the first string of long golden tinsel, glimmering like her heart whenever Lana touched her body or her soul.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know if you're still reading! Readership on this piece has dropped recently. I enjoy writing this so much, but it's comforting to know there are still a few people following and that I'm not doing something wrong. Thank you!
"I want you to touch her." Dr. Thredson's voice echoed through the room. He paced somewhere behind Lana, but she couldn't rip her eyes away from the frozen corpse in front of her. He had removed the blanket covering Wendy's nude body, leaving her splayed out and exposed. All the places Lana had once caressed and adored, once flushed pink when she licked them, held a blue-gray tinge. Her beautiful eyes fixed up on the ceiling, unmoving, unfocused. The two urges warred inside of Lana—one, ordering her to go to Wendy, to protect her, to cover her from this horrible man even in death; the other, shrieking its repulsion at the empty, soulless body and the faint scent of rot attached to it. She remained fixed on the spot, unable to approach her lover, unable to flee. "This is very important to your treatment, Lana. I need you to make love to her." Make love? A horrified, high-pitched noise hiccuped in the back of Lana's throat, something she couldn't have replicated if she tried. "Go ahead. She won't hurt you. She's the same Wendy you left at home. Just a little colder."

Another squeak, muffled alongside the stifled sob, shuddered from her chest. She brought a hand to her mouth. She's not the same. She's dead! She's dead! It echoed in her head, a mantra, as if the repeated words would make her more likely to understand them. She's dead! Yet the madman's eyes fixed upon her like horrible gleaming bits of coal from an open mine. They threatened to catch fire, to ignite her if she didn't bend to his will and approach the dead body of her lover, her girlfriend, her soulmate, sprawled out there on the cool cement floor. She scooted on her butt, propelling herself with her hands, toward the corpse. Her chin refused to cease its wobbling; her tears rolled down her cheeks in babbling brooks, dripping off of her face into tiny puddles on the floor.

She stopped beside Wendy's head. "It's going to be okay, Lana." She shivered from head to toe at the empty words offered by her captor. "You can do this. You are stronger than your disease."

With one cold hand, she cupped Wendy's cheek. The dry skin under her fingertips threatened to flake like thin paper. The lips popped open. Underneath, the bloody, flayed gums revealed the jawbone. "Oh, god," she said. It escaped in a deep, throaty voice. "Oh, god, Wendy..." She moaned it like she would have moaned the name in pleasure. Her feelings for Wendy were paralleled—love and love, one twisted by ecstasy and the other by grief. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. She brushed the brunette locks behind her ear. A handful of the brittle hair fell out. "Why did you do this to her?" The pained cry ripped from her where she didn't intend to release it, but she managed to lift her accusatory gaze back to him. "Why did you do this?" she shouted. If he killed her, she would be with Wendy again—wherever that happened to be.

"Don't worry about me, Lana. It's time to focus on you, now." He smiled. His rows of straight white teeth bared at her like a snarling wolf. How had she once seen benevolence in this façade? How could he appear so calm and collected while Wendy, her Wendy, her precious Wendy, lay in his basement, slowly rotting in an ice cooler? How long has she been like this? Lana had so many questions, but he would answer none of them. "Do as you're asked, and I'll put you to bed and give you a snack."
Lana's stomach flipped. *A snack?* She couldn't imagine hunger. She glanced back down to Wendy's face. *What would Wendy say?* Wendy would want her to live. Wendy would want her to fight. Wendy wouldn't want her to starve to death. Wendy would want her to do anything feasible to escape this and survive and write the story—the story she had wanted. So, cupping the cold face between her just as cold hands, she leaned forward, drawing nearer, nearer, and Wendy's jaws parted, giving way to the black hole in the back of her throat, and something screeched in the background as loud as the electric currents ripping through her skull, the bright ringing of a telephone magnified more times than she could comprehend—

Vice-like hands closed around her shoulders, and she ripped from the nightmare, her own shrieks rattling the walls of the house and drowning out her ears from any of the other stimulus. Arms wrapped around her body, embracing her shoulders and chest, fixing her in place. She writhed, but after a brief, futile struggle, she allowed the warm entity to cradle her like a child against its front. Her shriek shattered like glass, all the shards sobs of distress. "Wendy—" She choked out the name in a broken voice, distraught. *Wendy, Wendy, Wendy,* her brain chanted, the very name her mantra. It left her hollow of all other conscious thought. "Wendy," she whimpered, her fists pinching the covers tight around her mouth. Sweat rolled off of her body and drenched her hair to her scalp.

The telephone rang again—she remembered dimly having heard it in her dream, though all the pieces of the nightmare whirled around in chunks inside her head, fragments and flashes of light. She focused on the sound of the shrill telephone bell to ground herself in reality. A quieter sound, a voice, met her ears. She closed her eyes and released a shaky gasp, sucking another trembling breath. "It's okay, Lana, it's okay. You're safe. I've got you." Those spidery, pale hands smoothed up and down her back, caught in her hair, managed to roam all over her person in loving movements to sate her anxiety. "I'm right here, cupcake. I won't let anything hurt you. I love you. I love you more than anything else." Her words streamed without inhibition. Lana fell into the croaking notes of her voice. She focused on the words Mary Eunice uttered right at the cusp of her ear, the sensation of breath fluttering against her lobe, the warm hands roaming her back. Placing her focus on Mary Eunice helped her steady her breathing. "Lana? Can you hear me?" *Yes.* She nodded. *I'm going to get one of your pills now. Is that okay with you?*

A pill. Right. Lana's tongue darted across her dry lips while she considered. "W-Wait," She stammered. "Not yet. *I'm not ready to be alone yet. I need you a moment more.* She shifted, resting one head on the curves of Mary Eunice's collarbones. Her muscles melted one by one until, spineless as a slug, she draped over Mary Eunice's body, a sweaty, heaving mess of anxiety. "I'm sorry," she murmured, eyes drowsing. *I just did this last week. And the week before.* She didn't have the strength to lift her fist to her eyes and rub them. Reflecting on her night terrors, she counted them—three since Thanksgiving. "I'm going to start taking one before bed."

"Don't be sorry." Mary Eunice adjusted her grip around Lana at the movement. Through the hollows of her chest, her heartbeat echoed in Lana's ear, pumping all too fast, too hard; she could hear its booming bass notes, but she could also feel it thrashing against her cheekbone, heavy and painful. "You're all sweaty. Do you want me to run you a bath?" Mary Eunice smoothed her hand over Lana's wet brow, mopping the drenched brunette locks out of her face. "When you're ready, of course."

Lana shook her head. The movement made her head swim with dizziness. "No, I..." She cleared her throat, coughing around the lump forming there. "I'll take a shower in the morning." She closed her eyes, but flashes on horn-rimmed glasses awaited her, the chill of a dead corpse pressed against her body, and she hitched a breath, grabbing onto Mary Eunice with desperate, vice-like hands, wrenching her eyes open into the lamplight. "I—I'm fine," she insisted, "please, don't worry."
A cool kiss pressed to her forehead. "You can't stop me from worrying." In one of Mary Eunice's hands, she clutched her rosary, pressing it between her hand and Lana's body. *I scared her again.* Guilt twisted inside of her. She cast her gaze away from Mary Eunice's, regretting her inability to control herself in her sleep. One hand went to her cheek and caressed it, cool and dry, wiping away the tears and sweat and heat tied into her face. "Tell me when you're alright." Subtle as a small bird lifting from the branches of a tree, Mary Eunice's hand shifted down the rosary. *She's praying right now.* She rolled one particular bead between her fingertips. "I'm here. I love you."

"I love you, too." Lana's voice cracked. Pressing her face deeper into the crook of Mary Eunice's neck, she sucked in a long breath, slurping her sweet scent. *Let her finish praying. Don't interrupt. You'll be okay. You're right here with Mary Eunice. She won't let anything happen to you.* A lump continued to swell in her throat, and each time, she swallowed it. Each intake of breath, she focused on tensing her muscles, and with each exhale, she relaxed them. *I'm going to be okay. It's going to be okay.* She managed to uncinch her fingers from around Mary Eunice's body and press them into the bundle of sheets. "Where's Gus?" she mumbled, not meaning to speak the musing aloud.

Mary Eunice's thumb, dry and cracked from the cold December weather, dragged across the soft curve of her cheek. "He's on the floor." Brown eyes lifted up to meet hers, all crystalline, the color of the midnight sky in the dim light of the room. *God, she's so beautiful,* Lana admired. Given more strength, she would have lifted her arms around Mary Eunice, captured her face between her hands, and kissed her, kissed her hard with all of her gratitude spun into her mouth. But she did not have the strength to do more than shift her head up higher, listening to Mary Eunice's low voice croak through her collarbones and ribcage. "He kept getting his cone collar stuck on the blankets. I gave him our sheet when he got off the bed."

A wry chuckle rose from Lana's throat. "Do you think he'll ever forgive me?"

"Oh, don't be silly. He doesn't know the difference. He'll just be glad when it's time for the stitches to come out, and he can wear his regular collar again."

"You can do that, right? Since the vet will be closed."

"Yes, I can."

The telephone began ringing again. "Goddamn telephone," she muttered, pushing back from Mary Eunice and sitting up on her own. Her arms and legs didn't tremble as much now, and she could support herself without clinging to some medium of comfort. "I hate this season. The holidays—mid-November to mid-January. The neighbors have the phone ringing off the hook—" The shrill of bell cut her off. She squinted up at the wall clock, but her vision was blurred from the abrupt awakening. "What time is it?"

Mary Eunice followed her, granting a concerned look to the clock. "It's almost four in the morning." She bit her lower lip. Her expression froze for a moment, and then she continued, "I hope nothing's wrong."

"Do you know how many times they've called?"

"This is at least the third time." Mary Eunice's face softened. She placed a hand on Lana's shoulder. "Don't worry about it. Can I go get your pill now? You've been sweating. You need to drink some water. I don't want you to be dehydrated." Lana bobbed her head in agreement, supporting her chin in her hand. "Okay. I'll be right back." She pecked Lana on the cheek, cool and friendly and sweet.
The light in the house followed Mary Eunice; she turned on the bathroom light, turned it off, flicked on the hall light, vanished up into the kitchen, and reappeared with the shadows pursuing her. Nervousness quelled inside Lana's chest, but when Mary Eunice sank beside her onto the mattress again, she pressed herself flush against the other woman's body, letting the coolness settle her unease. She took the Valium and leaned back against Mary Eunice's chest. "Thank you," she murmured. Mary Eunice prodded her with the bottled water she had brought, and with trembling hands, Lana managed to unscrew the lid and lift it to her lips, taking a few long, deep swigs. "See, I'm drinking, I'm drinking," she assuaged.

"Good." Mary Eunice wrapped her arms snugly around Lana's middle, not the least bit offput by the sweat clinging to her body or the accompanying scent. "Tell me what you need. I want you to be comfortable."

After a few more swallows of water, Lana placed the bottle on the nightstand. "This is good." _I smell like the boys' locker room of a high school football game, but I feel... okay._ She nuzzled Mary Eunice's cheek. Mary Eunice granted her a small kiss in return, short, chaste, not quite enough. Lana leaned up with everything her muscles could muster to plant their mouths together in earnest, deep, lips shifting against one another, tongues pressing through lips into one another's mouths. _Don't. Don't take advantage of her. She won't tell you no right now._ Lana severed, gentle and slow, and at the pink blush traveling across Mary Eunice's cheeks, she opened her mouth to apologize, but Mary Eunice grinned, adorable, whole face melting red as she leaned forward to give Lana another light, teasing kiss. _Oh, goodness._ "Even better," she whispered, almost breathless, as they separated.

Mary Eunice laughed, light as a butterfly's wings on the air, quiet to accommodate the faintness of the morning. "I'm glad you're alright." She tugged up the blankets around Lana's body, all the way up to her neck. "Are you chilled? It's cold in here, and your pajamas are all wet. I don't want you to get sick."

"I'm fine." _I shouldn't be kissing her like that._ Lana's mind lingered on the kiss. Even if she phrased it as a joke, even if she teased Mary Eunice with it, even if Mary Eunice thought it was totally platonic—Lana knew better, she knew she was taking advantage of Mary Eunice, she knew she was harming Mary Eunice for her own indulgences, and she couldn't live with knowing it. "Really, I feel a lot better now." She sank back onto the pillows and patted the spot beside her. Mary Eunice lay down close enough for Lana to smell the sweet sourness of morning breath on her every exhale. "Thank you for being so good to me," Lana murmured.

"You don't have to thank me. You took care of me when I was sick. And I want you to be well. I'm your friend, and I love you." Mary Eunice smoothed her hair out of her eyes again, admiring her face; those gentle blue eyes grazed her with the most admiration and affection Lana had known in a long time. _But she used the word friend. What else would she call herself? I can't have her. Even if she wanted me—even if she knew I wanted her—she's off-limits._

Lana nuzzled into the rough hand like a cat seeking an affectionate human touch. "I love you, too, sunshine." She smiled up to her, lazy; the Valium began to kick in. But something about the way the arms cinched around her middle made her brow quirk with discomfort. "Let's switch—let me hold you."

They shifted, Lana on her back, Mary Eunice curled up on top of her. The phone kept ringing. "Maybe we should answer it," Mary Eunice murmured to her, against her skin. "Just to tell them they're not going to get an answer this hour of the morning... Or tell them they've got the wrong number. They've got to be waking up the whole neighborhood."

Lana groaned. "You're right." She sighed with distaste. Mary Eunice shuffled off of her, and they both sat up. On the floor, Gus leapt to his paws, the large white cone framing his blocky head in a
strange light. His skinny tail wagged in greeting. They both rose and headed up the hall, Mary Eunice wrapping herself in robes and slippers before she grabbed the leash and took Gus out into the snow, while Lana went to the office. The phone rang again. "Eastside 7-7387," she answered, groggy in her enunciation of the syllables.

A feminine voice crackled to her over the phone, weak, familiar yet unfamiliar, from a place Lana scarcely remembered. "Lana?" whispered the woman on the other end of the line, a distinct southern drawl attached to her every word. "Lana, is it you? I—I need to talk to you. Please, Lana, please, can we talk?"

"Who the hell is this?" A cold stone sank through her gut. I know who it is.

"You're damn right I don't. What do you want? It's been fifteen years, high time for somebody to need money—"

"It's Daddy." Frieda sniffled, muffling a sob. "He's—He's real sick. The doctor says he won't make it to Christmas—Lana, please, he wants to see you. You're all he's talked about for days. He wants to see you."

Lana set her jaw into a brief, silent consideration. "I am not driving a thousand miles down the east coast for my father to tell me I disappointed him from his deathbed," she said in a cold, brittle voice.

"No, no, Lana, he's sorry! He's so sorry, he's been sorry for years—" Frieda blew her nose. Lana held the speaker away from her ear at the grotesque sound. "We saw the news, about you—about Wendy. He was devastated. He blames himself. He just wants to tell you he's sorry before—" She broke off and hiccuped. Lana's eyes stung. Even as a child, she had always loathed to see Frieda cry, and more than once, she'd bloodied her knuckles to harm the cause of her tears. "Won't you please come home?"

"I—" Lana tripped over her own thoughts and words. The news had rendered her speechless. She paused to swallow hard and shook her head. "I'm just, I—" I don't know what to say. She pinched her eyes closed and touched the bridge of her nose. The last time she had seen her family, her father, she had feared for her life. How much did he deserve her forgiveness? How could he deserve her time now when he hadn't wanted it before?

"Get out of my house! Get out! Landon!" Lana flung on her sweater with nothing underneath. A pair of underwear slapped her on the face—not hers, but Wendy hadn't noticed when she'd thrown them. She scrambled into them and fumbled with her skirt. "Landon!" her mother shrieked again.

"Mama, please," Lana implored, grasping at the front of her sweater; her hands shook too hard to button it up. "Please, don't do this—" Wendy didn't stop her rapid attempts to shovel all of their possessions into their purses. "I can explain!"

"What needs explaining?" asked her father, rounding the corner; his dark eyes were serious in spite of his light words. "What's the matter, Helen?"

She sputtered, face redder than the tomatoes in the heat of summer. "They're—They're—" She shuddered, like the word itself disgusted her. "Our daughter is a dyke," she breathed, an
unspeakable sin. Her hands balled into tense, white fists, knuckles bleached from the sheer hatred planted into her palms. "Our daughter—Our daughter is a dyke."

Wendy flanked Lana, an equally dark look upon her face. She placed an arm on the inside of Lana’s elbow. "Let's go," she urged, a quiet voice, refusing to make eye contact with either of the adults. "Please, let's—let's just go, Lana."

"Is it true?" he interrupted. They both fell silent, eyes fixed on his shiny, black-toed shoes. "What your mother said. Is it true?" Wendy shifted beside her, feet sinking into the shag carpet, hand tightening around Lana's arm; neither of them had the bravery to affirm or the nerve to deny the accusations. Lana licked her lips. The acidic, salty flavor of Wendy's vulva lingered on her tongue. "Answer me!"

Wendy spoke first. "Yes, sir, it's true. Mrs. Winters saw us right."

"I asked my daughter, not you," he snapped in return, and Wendy obediently fell silent, casting a sideways glance at Lana, shared thoughts traveling between the two of them like radio waves. Boy, we're in trouble now. "Tell me what is going on, Lana." He arched an eyebrow, arms crossed, regarding her with a thousand questions and a thousand more judgments.

Lana's tongue froze in the back of her throat where she gazed up at her father, fighting the way he looked at her, a small mouse under his claws, a piece of clover before a lawnmower; she shrank before him, small, insignificant. "Wendy said right," she whispered. She couldn't deny what her mother had witnessed. And she wouldn't deny Wendy. Wendy deserved better. Wendy deserved all of her love, even if it cost her her family. This isn't how we planned on doing this. We didn't plan on doing it at all! The two of them had never conceived of a scenario where they had to tell their families anything at all. They had always planned on living together and explaining it to their families like that—simply, in terms they would understand and wouldn't question. "I… I love her." Her father's stern eyes met hers, narrowed into slits, and she swallowed hard under his scrutiny. "I'm in love with her," she amended, voice softening at the admission, uttered like a prayer—and some part of it was a prayer, a prayer for them not to overreact, a prayer for her and Wendy both to escape with their skins intact. She lifted her head, holding eye contact with him. She had declared her side in this battle. She couldn't back away from this challenge. "And I'm not sorry."

Her father's dark eyes glittered like hateful gemstones, like lumps of coal fueling a fire of loathing rage. Her mother's reeked of disgust, her upper lip curled upward, like she tasted something bitter or smelled a rotting skunk carcass on the street. Timothy headed past them, down the hall. "Hey," he greeted, a lazy wink passing from him, but he took less than a second to read their expressions. "Hey… What's going on here?" His brow quirked, he glanced from one parent to another to Lana and Wendy. "Mama?" he questioned after a long silence. "Daddy?" Lana stole a glance to him, pleading, pitying, and his face contorted at the sight of her. "Frieda just finished cooking, if y'all are—"

"Timothy, go get my gun."

Timothy stilled, motionless from head to toe save for the rapid blinking of his long eyelashes. He stood, gaping at his father in disbelief at the order he had received. "Sir?" he questioned in a weak, uncertain voice. His hands lifted up, arms to his chest, trying to push away and create space between the tense locking of family with family. "I—I don't think…”

"You heard me. Go get my gun."

He split without another word to them, head down, shoulders bent. Wendy seized Lana by the wrist, tight, grasping at bone. "We don't want any trouble," she murmured, eyes intense lifting up
to her father, darting to her mother. "Please, Mr. Winters—just let us leave, we won't be any trouble here anymore."

"Daddy, please," Lana begged. Timothy's feet fell heavily upon the carpeted floor, each step quickening the pace of her heart; she shrank back against Wendy. She wriggled her wrist free from the other woman's grasp and entangled their fingers like knotted baling twine. *Is he going to kill us?* Her heart skipped a beat at the prospect. *We should have known better. We never should have tried to make love here. We should have known something like this would happen.* "Daddy," she whispered, voice dropping in volume at his unyielding face, the set jaw, the bared teeth. "Daddy, I—" She cut herself off. She would make no headway with him. Instead, she faced her mother. "Mama, I—"

A harsh backhand collided on her cheek. She swooned backward. Wendy caught her under the arms and held her upright. "You have no right to call me that!" fumed her mother, heat breaking across her face in bright red streaks. "Get out! Get out of my house! Get out of my sight!" Her eyes had filled with tears, but they didn't stop her from shrieking the words at Lana, each syllable a condemnation.

"Are you alright?" Wendy asked in a whisper, and Lana had a split second to nod her indication. Blood trickled from the inside of her cheek and trailed down her throat in a bitter, salty flavor.

Timothy returned, white with nervousness; a hysterical giggle rose from him when his father wrapped his hand around the barrel of the gun. "Daddy, what's—" He didn't release the gun, both hands wrapped around it, refusing to relinquish it. "Tell me what's going on."

"Give me the gun."

"Tell me, and I will." The older man reached to wrangle it away from his son, but Timothy held fast, traveling alongside every jerk and twist thrust upon him, wrestling in the hallway; their mother ducked away.

"Your sister is a dyke!" The bellow interrupted the wrestling match. Timothy landed flat against the wall with a grunt. Their father whirled upon Lana and Wendy. The cocking of the gun cracked through the air. Wendy tensed, and their hands spun together; Lana swelled up, making herself a larger target, so she could accept any bullet meant to penetrate Wendy's body. "You have thirty seconds," he purred in a dangerous, smooth drawl, "to leave this house and this property. We don't want to see you again." They both waited, frozen, ogling at him, anticipating rounds to leave the chamber of the gun at any time. "One. Two. Three."

Wendy sprang into action. She slammed into Lana from behind, a startled horse bolting for freedom, and at the nudge, Lana stumbled forward and caught herself through rapidly pedaling feet, bouncing off of the wall but not stopping. Wendy's hand closed around the underside of her bicep and dragged her through the living room. "Go, go!" Wendy urged. From the couch, Roger and Frieda observed, wide-eyed and paralyzed by shock, unable to do anything but stare, and Lana stared back with utter hopelessness written upon her face. *Why is this happening to us?* The question echoed like a dim candle flickering in her mind, reverberating through the crevices of her boggled mind and the dull pain where her mother had slapped her.

The unpainted porch dug splinters into their bare feet, and the dewy grass attached wetness and loose blades to their ankles and toes. Wendy bowled Lana over into the car; she rolled through the bucket seat and hit her head on the passenger side window while Wendy thrust the key into the ignition and cranked it. The motor sputtered and growled to life like an aggressive old hunting dog. She whipped the steering wheel around and whirled out of the driveway, foot stomped onto the gas.
Lana scrambled to sit upright, but from the back window, her father's silhouette gleamed under the porch light, illuminated where he trained the barrel of the gun at their car. "Get down!" she shrieked, seizing Wendy by the shoulders and shoving her down into the seat. The car swerved on the road. Neither of them could see the street. The wheels bounced on uneven ground. The firearm fired once, its rumble splitting the air, and Lana yelped, flattening her body tighter over Wendy's. Again it thundered, and again. The car smashed into a ditch and crashed to a halt, jostling her into the floor. As she scrambled to right herself, she peeked out the back windshield again, but around the curves of the dusty dirt road, she couldn't see her home. Her father was long behind them. "Wendy?" Lana tugged herself back up. Wendy turned her head, blood trickling down her temple, blinking with a certain bleariness in her eyes. "Wendy?"

"I'm alright," Wendy murmured. She wiped the blood away with the back of one hand and twisted the steering wheel. After a moment of whipping the wheel and gunning the gas, the car revved itself up out of the ditch and onto the dirt road. "Are you?"

"I..." Lana turned her head to look back again, but the night had consumed her childhood home, immersed in unforgiving black forest. Her eyes flooded with tears. I don't understand where we went wrong. Wendy glanced sideways at her out of the corner of her eye, and then she folded an arm across Lana's shoulders. Lana snuggled close beside her. Wendy's chest heaved in a broken sob, muffled, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I have you," Lana murmured faintly. The moonlight illuminated the streaks into silvery lines on Wendy's face. "We'll be alright, won't we?"

"Of course," Wendy murmured. "Of course. We'll be fine." She snorted around the snot dribbling from her nose and wiped her face with the back of her hand. "We're going to be just fine. Without them. You're the only family I need."

Lana cleared her throat. Her cheeks burned from tears slipping away without her consent. She smeared them away with the backs of her hands. Her family had hurt her. They had thrown her away, her and Wendy alike. They had decided they didn't want her, and she had accepted the fact years ago—she would never again have a mother, a father, a sister, either of her brothers, and she had replaced them with the woman she loved, making her all the more alone in Wendy's absence. She had adopted the label of "orphan" and worn it with her head held high. But now, Frieda wept to her from over a thousand miles away, pleading for her to come home to a place she had never belonged. "What does Mama say?"

"Mama says it's fine. She wants him to be happy."

"She doesn't want me there."

Frieda heaved a sigh, a familiar tone to it in spite of the years she had spent without hearing it; Frieda's exasperated huffs were commonplace, growing up. "Lana, please, I know—I know you and Mama have your differences, but can't you let those things lie while you're here?"

Bringing a hand up to her temple, Lana pressed her elbow onto the table. "I'm not going to pick up and leave everything behind a week before Christmas just to have her chase me out of the house again. Once was enough." Once was more than enough. Once was the scariest thing that ever happened to me, until... everything else. She swallowed, mouth dry of all saliva at the thoughts. How could she face her family now, without Wendy? She could scarcely conjure a memory of her childhood without Wendy somewhere nearby. They were on the baseball diamond, playing catch; they were in the woods, scaling trees; they were in the creek, swimming fully clothed in the heat of the summer sun.

"She's not going to do that, Lana. She's changed, too. Maybe not as much as Daddy has, but... It's enough. She wants him to be at peace." Frieda hesitated a moment, sniffling again. "She's the one who asked me to call you. She wants you to come home. I think—I think she's ready to make
amends, even if she's not admitting it yet."

Lana pinched the bridge of her nose. A pressure bloomed behind her eyes and in her forehead, driving her onward, making her shudder and cringe with pain; whether it came from the tumult of emotions within her or the tears she shed, she wasn't certain. "I don't have a very good reason to trust any of you. Or to forgive you." None of her family deserved her forgiveness. Perhaps she could find common ground with Frieda, with Timothy, with Roger—they were just teenagers when she left—but her parents didn't deserve a piece of skin off of her hide. "What do you expect me to do?"

"I don't expect you to do anything. I was hoping you'd—you'd want what they want, but if you don't, I—I don't know…"

"Are they doing this because they think I'm going to live a lonely life of celibacy without Wendy? Or are they waiting to hook me up with some new farmer in town?" The bitter flavor of the words hurled from Lana's tongue, each one spat like venom spraying from a snake's fangs. They could never love her for her. They would never care for her the way they cared for Frieda and Timothy and Roger, the ones who weren't rejected from the family—the ones who wouldn't leave a trail of disappointment in their wake. Just as Wendy's family had always known her as Winifred, Lana's family would never recognize her as what she was. "I haven't changed, Frieda, and I'm not going —"

"I know," Frieda interrupted. "Lana, I know." She released a soft sigh. "Look. If you just don't shove it in everyone's faces, you'll be fine, I promise." Her voice had darkened into disapproval. "We can't change you. Only you can do that. Daddy knows that now, and I think Mama does, too. We just want you to come home. We just want to be a family again."

"You haven't wanted me for fifteen years."

"Lana, please." Frieda was crying again, voice thick and throat closed up. "I can't change what anyone else said to you or did to you. I want to be with my sister while my Daddy is sick! I want you here! I want to be able to hold your hand and cry on your shoulder and not act like you're some dirty unmentionable secret again! And Daddy wants you to come home, and I—I just—"

She broke off into a sob. "I miss you!" she wailed, a broken whimper, twisted by the years of grief which Lana knew all too well. "Please, I just want you to come home."

Oh, god. Lana's heart twisted with guilt. What had happened wasn't Frieda's fault. She didn't call. She could've called. She could've written. She could've done something. Lana had lived for years assuming her siblings loathed her just as much as her parents did—they had never made any attempt to reach out and prove otherwise, and after Wendy's letter was returned, she decided they all held the same opinion. Frieda's heart is breaking. Lana closed her eyes tight. "Frieda, I…" She trailed off, uncertain how she could even begin to respond. Should I go? She didn't know. I can't do this alone.

Beyond, in the living room, the front door slammed shut with a gust of wintry wind bursting in after Mary Eunice. "I love you," Lana murmured into the phone, "but I'm not… I'm not sure I'm ready to forgive anyone for what happened."

"We don't deserve it." Frieda cleared her throat, coughing. Somewhere beyond her, soft voices murmured back and forth. Lana couldn't make them out. "So… you won't come?"

"I didn't say that." Big blue eyes landed on her back; the hair on the back of her neck prickled, familiar and warm. She could never reject the loving way with which Mary Eunice examined her. She spun around in the office chair, as far as the telephone cord would allow her, and lifted her eyes up to the nun, hair all rumpled by sleep, snowflakes smattered in the blonde locks. At the
sight of her, Mary Eunice shuffled closer, and Lana reached up to take her hand, wrapping the frozen fingers in her own. *It's too cold out there. She should've worn more clothes.* "I need to think about it. I don't... I don't think it's wise, but..." *My life has been made of unwise choices, lately.* She glanced up at Mary Eunice at the thought. *I'm in love with a nun. It's not like I can fuck up much worse than that." I'll think about it. I'll call you back by—by tomorrow. As in today, tomorrow. Where are you calling from?"

Frieda fed her the information, and she wrote it down in her notepad beside her on the desk. When the line died, she listened to the dial tone for a few moments longer before she allowed the phone to fall back into the cradle. A cool hand caressed her hot, wet cheek and wiped away the tears lingering on her pink face. Mary Eunice didn't ask any questions. She took Lana by the hands and tugged her up to her feet, led her to the couch, and deposited her there, where Gus scrambled up in a series of graceless thuds, his cone collar catching on the edge of the couch. Lana grabbed him under the forelegs and helped hoist him up onto the cushions, far too much dog for her to manage alone, though the aid let him reach one hind leg up onto couch. With the extra leverage, he huffed and flopped beside her. His pink tongue lolled and dangled from his mouth in sloppy, slobbery kisses aimed for her cheeks, and when she attempted to dodge, he pinned her down by the chest and thrust his wet nose into her face, drool hanging off of his whiskers. "Oh, goodness," she sniffled, fighting to push him off. "Sister!" she called, voice a croak. "Help!" Gus thrust his tongue into her mouth at the opportunity. "Uck!"

Mary Eunice placed the glass of water she had gone to fetch on the end table and shooed Gus off of Lana. Whining, he flopped back onto the floor and sat at their feet, brown eyes wide and expectant. Mary Eunice pressed the cool glass of water into Lana's hand. The snowflakes had begun to melt into her hair, dampening it in the orange lamplight. As she shivered, goosebumps pebbled all over her exposed arms. Lana scooted nearer and tugged the throw from the back of the couch, wreathing it around her shoulders like a cape, and a soft smile eased Mary Eunice's pink lips. Red flushes from the bitter winter wind coated her cheeks, and her feet were pale, the toes blue-tinged. She folded them beneath herself. "Who was on the phone?"

The phone. Right. Lana's stomach sank. She flexed her hand around the glass of water, lifting it to her lips. A shiver passed through her arms. *I just took a Valium.* Anxiety didn't swell up within her like she expected, courtesy of the medication, but her insides ached. "It was my sister. Frieda."

She averted her eyes, but Mary Eunice leaned forward, sorrow in the creases beside her eyes. One of her chilled hands reached for Lana's, and Lana accepted it, rolling it in her own to try to return the warmth to it. "My father is sick. And he—he isn't going to get better." Soft, pale arms wreathed around her waist. She slumped over, a spineless slug against Mary Eunice's body. *She is so soft.* The familiar rainy scent exhaled from her, and Lana exhaled through her nose. "He wants to see me again, before..." She drifted off. *Before he dies.* It struck her, a fist in the gut. *I never thought of him as mortal before.* Her whole life, even now, she had seen him as some deity who would never fade away, some almighty holder of power.

"Are you going to?"

She averted her eyes, staring hard at the rug. "I don't know." She leaned her head against Mary Eunice's shoulder. "I—I just don't know." A tender kiss pressed to her forehead, lips cold like the rest of Mary Eunice from her excursion outside. But Mary Eunice offered no advice; she only provided her own touch, the comfort given by her body and the understanding look upon her face. "Do you think I should?" Lana ventured. *I want your advice. I want to know what you would do. I want to know what you think.*

"No one knows what you should do except you, Lana," Mary Eunice murmured, quiet encouragement written upon her face, but beneath it, her expression was muddled, unreadable. *She always wears her emotion on her sleeve.* But now, she had disguised it from
Lana's view. Lana held her blue gaze, fondling the warm hand in her grasp with abandon. She adored the soft, pale skin beneath her fingertips. "You're the only one who knows what they did, and if you're ready, or willing, to forgive them. I can't tell you what's right."

"What would you do?" Lana pressed.

"What I would do doesn't matter."

Lana narrowed her eyes. The unusual reticence troubled her. Mary Eunice never withheld anything from her, not like this—sure, her eyes gleamed with secrecy when she placed another package under the Christmas tree (and Lana wondered what on earth she had done to manage to procure so many items tagged with her as the receiver; with no money and no means of transportation, she almost suspected Mary Eunice had somehow magically conjured something she wanted into existence), but she had never deflected a direct question in such a way. "It matters to me," Lana said, slower this time. She drew back from the tight embrace to look at Mary Eunice, to examine her, the sudden detachment. "It's important to me. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't."

Mary Eunice averted her eyes. She withdrew her hand from where Lana had caught it and folded it closer to her body. "I would give anything just to have a picture of my father. Just to know what he looks like. His face changes in my mind—he always looks most like the last man I saw." The uttered words settled upon Lana's shoulders like a set of heavy boulders weighing her down, sinking to the bottom of the ocean. How easily she had accepted the word orphan, how she had adopted it onto herself like another of her labels. She was brunette; she was a lesbian; she was an orphan. But she wasn't—not really. Her parents had betrayed her, certainly, but it was reversible. She had the opportunity to go back. Mary Eunice would never have that. Mary Eunice straightened, seeking Lana's gaze once again with a desperation upon her face. "But—I don't know what happened to you. I wasn't there. If you don't want to go, I won't resent you for it. No one deserves to endure what you faced from them."

Lana reached to take Mary Eunice's hand again, more persistent this time, and Mary Eunice didn't withdraw from her; Lana cradled it in her grasp, caressed it, gentle as a wounded bird in her palms. "I don't know what I should do." The dry callouses on Mary Eunice's palm had softened with time, now barely noticeable. She hadn't baked a single loaf of bread since coming to Lana's home. Did she hate it so much? she wondered. Or is she tired of it?

"What do you want to do?"

Shame boiled in the pit of her stomach. She began to turn her head, but a cool hand caught her cheek and held it there, round blue eyes meeting hers and holding them, an intense magnetism fixing them together. "I want to go." The answer surprised her. It wasn't what she planned to say. It wasn't what she wanted to say. The urge to pick up everything and run to them disgusted her. She didn't owe them anything. They had hurt her; they had hurt Wendy. "But I don't want to want to go. They don't deserve it." She had spent almost half of her life without her family where they could've been with her. I don't know anything about them. Was Frieda married? Timothy and Roger? Did they have children? They had placed her in exile, and now they expected her to come at their beck and call like an abandoned dog who still waited patiently for the return of its master.

Her pale eyes softened. "I know you were hurt. What they did wasn't right. You don't have to go if you don't think it's the right thing." She held Lana's dark gaze. Her fingers trailed the soft expanses of Lana's face, following the cheekbone and the temple. "You can't forgive until you're ready, if you're ready."

"I thought you were supposed to be all about forgiveness."

Mary Eunice chuckled. "Father Joseph told me it's okay to angry. He said it's all part of the
process. He said it's healthy. God understands." Her hand fell away from Lana's, and she scooted nearer, increasing the shared warmth between them; she tugged the throw from her own shoulders and used it to wrap around the both of them. "What matters is that it happens on your terms."

"Are you angry?" Lana asked in a quiet voice, a shift in subject she hadn't anticipated. *I don't think we're talking about my dad anymore.*

Their bodies pressed flush against one another, Lana analyzed how every slight curve of the other woman's figure fit against hers, like slender puzzle pieces locking together. At the invasive question, Lana almost apologized, but to her surprise, a small smile came to Mary Eunice's lips, and she shook her head. "Not really, no. I—I feel a lot of things, but I'm not angry. It brought me to you. I can't be angry about that." One willowy arm slipped around Lana's waist and held her close, Cinderella and Prince Charming dancing at the ball. Their eyes crinkled at the corners with sleep not yet finished. "If you don't go, will you regret it?"

"I don't know." Lana stared hard at the ground. She closed her eyes and inhaled, slow and deep, breathing in the essence of Mary Eunice, the calming perfume attached to her breath and hair. *I already have so much regret.* She blamed herself every day for what had happened to Wendy. *I have to live with that for the rest of my life. I don't want to deal with anything else.* "What if I wake up one morning when I'm—I don't know, fifty years old, and I think I should've gone while I had the chance?"

She looked back to Mary Eunice, hoping to find some input there, some opinion written in her eyes like a constellation guiding a sailor on the ocean back home, but Mary Eunice was pensive and blank. "I can't tell you what you should do, cupcake. I'll support you either way."

*I know.* The directionless pain in Lana's gut eased just a bit at the words. She had someone's unconditional love and support, and she would have it no matter what she chose. *I wish she would tell me what to do. I wish she would tell me what she thinks.* "What would you do?" she asked again, quieter this time, more serious. "If you were me. What would you do?"

Mary Eunice considered, but not for long. "I would go," she said. "But… I think we've established I'm not the best at acting in my own best interests."

"Why?" Mary Eunice fell silent, startled by the abrupt question, and Lana elaborated, "Why would you decide to go back?"

"Because, if that's what he wants, or needs, to feel at peace… I think he probably deserves it. I think everyone deserves that, to some degree. I couldn't live with thinking someone went on to the next life unhappily because of me. And…” She shrugged. "I would feel like I owed him that much, for my life, and for what I'd become, even if it was in spite of him rather than because of him." Her pale eyes glistened in the orange lamplight. "You're a strong woman, Lana. He's worse off for not having known you. You're more than I ever could be, and I'm sure you're more than he ever imagined."

Hot tears stung the back of Lana's eyes, and she shut them, slamming them like a door, closed on the world. *I will not shed a single tear more over this.* She clutched Mary Eunice's hand tighter. In it, she found strength. Clearing the lump from her throat, she bit the inside of her cheek. "I—I think I should go." Soft, spidery fingers tickled the back of her hand. "If I go, and I regret it, if it ends badly, I can at least say I tried. If I don't go, and I regret it, I'll spend the rest of my life wishing I would've gotten off of my ass and done something, and—I've got enough lifetime guilt already. I don't need to add anything else to it."

A light hand brushed a lock of dark hair behind Lana's ear. "Then I'll go pack you a bag, and you can call your sister and take a shower."
Lana snorted, narrowing her eyes. "Pack me a bag? Was your invitation not implied?" Mary Eunice ogled back at her in shock, and Lana pressed, "You're coming with me. It's too far to drive without company." I'm afraid. She had last known her family in Wendy's company—indeed, she had seldom known her family beyond Wendy; they were inseparable as children, and everyone knew it. I don't want to go alone. I don't want to grieve alone. I need you. What if she had an attack? Mary Eunice knew about her medication and knew what worked best to calm her. Oh, don't be such a child. That's not healthy to rely on her like that.

"I've not left the state of Massachusetts since I was five years old," Mary Eunice said in a somewhat muted voice. "Are you sure you want me there? It's your family. I don't want to cause any trouble."

"You won't be—I promise." Lana hesitated a moment before she amended, "Just make sure you pack your habit. My mother will shoot first and ask questions later."

"Understood."

They lingered there on the couch, holding each other's gazes. Mary Eunice lifted a hand to her lips and kissed her fingertips before she planted them on Lana's mouth. Lana caught her by the wrist and held the pads of her fingers there to her face. Her grip loosened, and she leaned forward; Mary Eunice's hand shifted through the air to cup Lana's cheek as they connected in a real, firm kiss. The heat of it, each breathing into the other's mouth, strengthened her, a goddess drinking ambrosia to restore her power at the peak of Mount Olympus. Her head tilted into the kiss, lips pushing forward, pushing hard, tongue parting her lips. Mary Eunice hesitated. Her breath hitched—it wafted, cool, across Lana's face through her nose—and she trembled like a dry, late-autumn leaf clinging to a branch in the breeze. But then, a rose bud opening to the sunlight, she parted her lips and allowed Lana to dive inside.

Lana's hands wrung deep into Mary Eunice's tangled golden hair. Oh, dear god. Mary Eunice grunted, a small sound—approval? What am I doing? This can't be right. But god, it feels so good. She tastes so good. The other's lips sucked on her writhing muscle and met it with her own, natural as the birds pointing southward for the winter. But it isn't. It's as natural as a dandelion blooming in mid-winter.

Mary Eunice tugged back, gentle but prompting, and loosened her lips from around Lana's tongue, sliding off of her mouth and back into the open air. A hot, red blush decorated her cheeks. Her breath flushed faster than usual. Lana had the urge to lean in, to press her nose against Mary Eunice's pulse point and feel its rapid-fire pealing throughout her every vein and capillary, fell how she trembled under Lana's touch. I should apologize. Lana met her eyes. "I'm sorry."

Pink lips pressed a second, chaste kiss to her mouth, tempting as the lemon floating in a glass of ice water. "Don't be. I like it." She withdrew nonetheless and stood. "I'm going to scrape the driveway. Do you have any chains we can put on the tires?"

"No—Don't bother. We've never had any problems in the past. The roads were clear last night."

"It's snowed since then, though."

"It'll be fine." Mary Eunice offered a hand, and she tugged Lana to her feet. "Thank you." She scanned Mary Eunice once, searching the nun; her pure blue eyes were open expanses of azure sky, but a shadow rested in their depths, looming like a storm on the horizon, and Lana didn't know what to make of it. She had seen it more than once, whenever they kissed too hard. It frightens her when I do that. She isn't used to it. She doesn't know how to say no. Lana tucked a free-hanging lock of blonde hair behind her ear. "Are you sure you're okay with this? Coming
"I couldn't dream of being anywhere else." Those crystalline eyes softened, the lines around her lips and eyes slackening. "I love you, cupcake."

Cupcake. Lana burned with mingled embarrassment and pleasure at the friendly nickname. Her stomach flipped into an overwhelming knot of butterflies attempting to escape through her chest, through her nose, through her ears, through her mouth. "I love you, too, sunshine."

They split, headed in two different directions; Lana called Frieda back and lingered on the line for only a moment before she hung up. *I do need to shower. But I should help pack.* A layer of sweat clung to her from the night terror, seemingly days past now. Mary Eunice had made up the bed and sprawled out one large suitcase on top of the covers, folding several pieces into it. Lana went to help her, but Mary Eunice shooed her away. "I've got it," she promised. "Go take a shower."

By the time she emerged, the bags were zipped shut, Gus reclining on the floor with his cone collar, the room empty with the bedside lamp flicked on, the closet shut, the bed made; Mary Eunice had, in the blink of an eye, prepared the house for a vacancy of undetermined length. *We're going to miss Christmas. A quiet mass was all she wanted for Christmas.* Lana pricked with guilt at the thought—perhaps misplaced guilt, but guilt nonetheless; she had never foreseen a state of events in which she and Mary Eunice couldn't make it to mass on Christmas Day. She had never foreseen anything similar to this at all, had never anticipated she would ever hear from her family again, had never dreamed of a world in which anyone from below the Mason-Dixon line wanted her presence or her forgiveness. It was so backward. "Sister?"

Wrapped only in the towel from the bathroom, Lana swept the empty bedroom with her gaze and tiptoed up the hall, the house vacant. Gus followed her, tongue dangling from his mouth in spite of the cold temperatures. *We're stressing him out. It's too early for us to be up. He's not used to this.* She cast a second glance back at him. Nothing sounded quite as fun as driving a thousand miles down the coast with a one hundred pound dog tagging along. But she couldn't leave him at home; no one else would want to look after him, and his stitches had to come out, and Mary Eunice was the only one she trusted to do it. "Sister?" she called again, peeking into the living room, afraid to enter, but the black of the night gleamed out the windows. No one outside the house could see her.

The front door was open, the screen shut behind it. Lana took a long coat from the rack and wrapped herself in it as she tiptoed nearer. Footprints in the snow tracked off of the porch to the car. Thick gray exhaust curled from the back of the vehicle, the motor rumbling idle, and around the back of rounded a coat-clad figure lumbering in the snow, pushing the snow off of the driveway with a heavy shovel. Lana held the coat in front of her body. "Sister?" The head lifted from beneath the scarf, and in the moonlight, illuminated by the headlights of the car, the hair glistened golden. Small flakes still drifted from the heavily clouded sky and smattered the air between them like sand blown up in a dust storm in the desert. "Come inside! It's freezing out here!"

"I'll be inside in a few minutes! I just want to let the motor warm and get the frost off the windshield." Mary Eunice leaned over the hood of the car and tugged on the windshield wipers to try and loosen them from where they had frozen in place. She propped the shovel against the side of the car and took the ice scraper against the windshield, but the chunks refused to loosen from where they fixed the windshield wipers in place.

Without much thought, Lana stepped out of the house, sticking her bare feet into the ankle-deep snow. The frigid ice consumed all of the heat from her skin; agony ripped across her flesh as her innate warmth was torn from her. She hobbled toward Mary Eunice through the snow, sliding across the icy patches underneath until she thudded against the hood of the car. "Let me help."
She grabbed the windshield wiper and tugged. "Can you get the scraper under it?" The chill stabbed daggers into her feet. Her eyes watered. She ignored the agony.

"Lana! You're not suitably dressed—" Mary Eunice fell silent at the sharp look Lana gave her, and she forked the ice scraper beneath the windshield wiper. Lana snatched it loose and folded it up into the air, and then she slid around to the other one, repeating the action, until her feet were reduced to tingling, numb blocks, and she lumbered only a step more before she fell to her knees. "Lana!" Mary Eunice rushed to her side and scooped her up under the arms.

Lana cursed. "Don't, I can't—Give me a moment." The snow clogged up the trench coat she had donned over her bath towel. I'm not wearing any underwear. I'm not wearing anything under this at all. She hissed at the realization. When had she become so foolish?

"You're going to get frostbite." Mary Eunice bent down and scooped her arms around Lana's middle. "Hold onto me."

"No way! You'll hurt yourself. I can walk!" Her feet had become aching, motionless boulders; she only knew they were attached to her legs because of the pain. "Let go of me! Put me down!"

"It's fifteen feet, Lana. I won't hurt myself." Through the layers of coats she had donned and the tobogan tucked over her ears, flattening her hair to her neck, muscles shifted against Lana's body, warm where they flexed. Mary Eunice's body was soft and safe, but she still carried the remnants of Briarcliff in the callouses on her hands, in the strength she once used to wrestle unhappy patients, in the shadows which crossed her face in the darkest hours of the night. "Put your arms around my neck." The moonlight, the snowflakes spiraling around, framed Mary Eunice's face in an ethereal light, and as Lana obeyed, Mary Eunice nuzzled into her hair. Her hands clasped and locked around her neck.

Mary Eunice staggered to her feet. Lana pinched her eyes closed tight at the lurching, half-expecting to drop back into the snow, but Mary Eunice remained upright, forming not even a grunt of protest at the weight in her arms. She's doing it. Lana fought to steady her breath. She wouldn't drop me. God, she's going to hurt herself. Snowflakes smattered her face. She turned her head to hide in Mary Eunice's chest. "I've got you." The croaked words were thin and strained, her gait uneven as she lumbered up the porch and into the house; Mary Eunice gave no other indications that the weight troubled her. Lana's bath towel slipped lower and lower beneath the long coat, unraveling from her body. Her breath hitched at each slip of the towel passing down her breasts, sliding down her body, until Mary Eunice settled her onto the couch. All the air whooshed out of both of their lungs. Mary Eunice knelt and seized one of Lana's frozen feet. "This might hurt," she cautioned.

Lana winced as the rough hands worked in tight circles to massage her cold foot. A long, hot breath wafted from her parted lips to try and ease the frigid pressure on the limb. Once she had returned some of the feeling to the first foot, she set to work on the second. "Why did you go out there?"

I wasn't thinking. "You weren't here. I got worried." Lana wrung her wet hands and stuffed them under her body to warm them. "I'm from Georgia. We don't have snow there. I forgot that it's so cold."

Mary Eunice chuckled. She bowed her head as she worked her thumbs over Lana's right foot, the one with the crooked little toe, and pressed her lips to its back, delicate and light, like she whispered a prayer, like she tickled the white skin with a feather. The pit of Lana's stomach ached. I love her. I shouldn't, but I do. I wish I could tell her. The mellow blue eyes met hers in the dim orange lamplight. A grin capped her pink lips. "Let me get you some dry clothes."
She retreated, down the hall, a sway to her step, and Lana averted her eyes. Shame pooled in her belly mingled with exhaustion. *Merry Christmas, Sister.* She couldn't bring herself to say the words. *It's going to be a long holiday.* Pinching the bridge of her nose, she listened to the hum of the rumbling motor outside, waiting for it to sweep her away and carry her back to the place she thought she had left forever.
The late evening setting sun beamed in through the windows of the car, the radio humming a dull, static-laden melody. In the back seat, Gus sprawled out, whole body spread out, muzzle propped up on the door so he could watch all the snow-covered scenery pass by through the window. Mary Eunice reclined against Lana's body, eyes lazing, soft snores fluttering from her nose. She'd drifted off a few hours ago, and Lana had no intentions of waking her. Of course, Lana's intentions seldom worked as planned. As she pressed the gas to accelerate up an icy hill, the head of blonde hair stirred and lifted her from her shoulder. She took her fists and rubbed her eyes. "Morning, sunshine," Lana teased, flashing a halfhearted smile.

Mary Eunice didn't reciprocate, blinking through groggy eyes from behind her mop of tangled hair. "You're not going to make it up this hill."

The answer delayed Lana's response. She frowned and glanced back to the street in front of her. "What do you—Oh, dear god." The car began to slide backward down the street. Lana planted her foot on the brakes. "Hold on." The car whirled around, skidding sideways back down the road. "Shit!" Mary Eunice braced against her, gripping her thigh while the other hand pressed against the door. Lana swung the steering wheel again, futilely seeking a grip on the icy road, but it didn't work; her car continued to rotate, spinning and slipping beyond her control. She let go of the steering wheel to let it correct itself. The car made two complete rotations, three, and smashed into a snowbank on the side of the road, pointing the opposite direction.

They hovered in silence for a moment, both white-faced in disbelief, Mary Eunice's lips buffering into a silent prayer though her eyes stretched wide, like she feared the car would start moving again if she blinked, if she allowed herself a brief reprieve for peace. Once the prayer had stuttered to a halt and she made the Sign of the Cross, Lana said in a faint voice, "Thanks for the warning."

Mary Eunice eased from her tense position and slid beside Lana, releasing a shaky, pent up breath. "Where are we? What time is it?"

"It's—it's almost seven. We're somewhere in New Jersey." Lana leaned back in her seat with a long sigh. "I'm sorry, that wasn't a very good awakening. I was looking for a rest stop. Gus is going to have to get out again soon." She stared out at the darkening landscape, resting in the snowbank. Her hands shivered; her head spun with a dizzy sort of hunger. How long had she gone without a meal? She couldn't remember. She couldn't remember how long they had been in this godforsaken car—she couldn't remember what hour they had set off that morning, though it seemed like ages ago.

Mary Eunice put a hand to the back of her head. "You feel a little warm. Have you eaten? I packed snacks."

Lana shook her head. "No, I—I'm fine. I need to focus on driving."

An unhappy purse of disapproval donned on Mary Eunice's lips. "You must be exhausted. C'mon, scoot over. Let me drive for awhile." She nudged Lana from the driver's seat and eased behind the
wheel, shifting gears and sliding back out of the snowbank with relative ease. "Which way was the rest stop?"

Once they had found the place, Lana filled the gas tank while Mary Eunice walked Gus; he limped through the snow and relieved himself, all too unhappy with the whole situation of the frost-covered earth. Mary Eunice skated down the sidewalk in her shoes, arms spiraling through the air to keep her balance. "The bathrooms are over there." She nodded in the right direction and helped Gus back into the car. "Be careful. The sidewalks are slippery."

Mary Eunice waited for Lana to return in the driver's seat of the car, fiddling with the radio so the dull crackling faded into clear voices singing through at her. She stopped at a heavy drum and guitar beat. A man's voice, tenor and light, rang out. "Come right back, I just can't bear it! I've got some love and I long to share it. Come right back, right back where you belong." The song faded out to the radio announcer's voice. "And that was the top hit of last year, still doing strong for the Honeycombs, 'Have I the Right'." Mary Eunice leaned her head back on the seat, gazing up at the ceiling of the car. The last rays of sunlight slipped from view behind heavy night clouds. "You know, I really do like the Honeycombs. Honey Lantree is looking fine on those drums. But this group just hasn't managed to get another hit! Not for lack of trying, of course. Up next, we've got Herman's Hermits and 'Can't You Hear My Heartbeat'. Merry Christmas, folks, and stay warm."

She glanced up to spy Lana careening out of control across the parking lot in a struggle to return to the car, clinging to her purse like it would keep her upright and spreading out her arms, seeking a nonexistent center of gravity. Lana hadn't managed the expert walk intended for icy conditions —the penguin waddle—and it showed. She managed every few feet like a new skater fighting for balance on the blades. Her dark hair sprayed out behind her, and circles rested beneath each eye. She is so beautiful. Mary Eunice's heart squeezed at the sight of her. I hope she knows what she's doing. She couldn't dream of someone, anyone, wanting to harm Lana, but she had witnessed it too many times to trust anyone, especially the family which had tossed her away like garbage. In spite of Mary Eunice's forgiving nature, she clung to a tiny, angry piece of herself which pointed an accusatory finger at these people she hadn't yet met, the ones who had destroyed and rejected Lana and Wendy and robbed them of any sense of family, made them rely on each other where they should have had support. Her eyes misted over. I don't understand how anyone could do that to her. Or to anyone. But especially to her.

The tenuous hold Lana had on balance slipped from between her fingers, sand through an hourglass, and she dove forward in a scramble. Her landing on the hood of the car came with a splat sound, spreadeagled and astonished, bright-eyed but exhausted in every crook of her face. Oh, dear. Mary Eunice bit back her laughter; she had never, in the few stories Lana had told her of growing up in the south, imagined Lana would be so bad at winter. She had never given much thought to the differences in winter weather. But Lana, ordinarily the pinnacle of grace and gravitas, was crippled by the sheets of ice and the inches of snow, shivering like a wet puppy, constantly burrowing in search of warmth. The winter made her as graceless as a leggy fawn, like the ones Mary Eunice had observed in the forest behind Briarcliff.

God, take us to Georgia and bring us home safely. Give us strength—I know Lana won't ask for it, so I will, on her behalf. She needs it. This is hard for her, harder than it should be. Her family was not Christ-like. Lana slithered around the car, both hands braced on the hood, sliding without lifting her feet, like she feared a shift in her weight on her feet would cause her to plummet to the asphalt below. Their story is the reverse of the prodigal son. She's made something of herself in spite of them, and they don't deserve her forgiveness, but she's here, anyway. Mary Eunice rolled her rosary between her fingers. The shape of the crucifix pressed into the pad of her thumb. Bring Lana peace. Please make this just another step on her journey to what she deserves.

The passenger door swung open. Lana skidded back along with it and fell upon the seats, all
sprawled out and graceless. "Oof!" She smoothed down her long skirt and dragged the door closed. Bright brown eyes flashed up to her, and she reached into her purse, pulling out a package of marshmallow coconut Snoballs, pink and sugary. "I stopped at the—Oh, sorry." Like someone jerked the zipper across her lips, Lana cut herself off upon spying the rosary in Mary Eunice's hand.

"Oh, no, I was finished." Mary Eunice tucked the rosary back into the pocket of her skirt, safely pressed against her thigh where she could access it if she needed it. "I needed a little bit of soothing." Lana ripped open the plastic packaging and let the two Snoballs tumble out onto the seat, sugar falling off them as they spilled and rolled between them. "You stopped at the vending machine?"

"I needed some soothing of my own variety. Here, take this one. They don't sell single packs." Lana pushed it toward her. She took two bottled waters out of her purse. "Drink up. We haven't eaten all day. We've provided more for Gus than for ourselves." At the mention of his name, Gus peaked over the back of the seat at the two of them, trying to reach their faces with his tongue, but his cone collar kept getting caught on the headrests.

Mary Eunice withdrew from the coconut treat. It flared in her mind like a hot coal tossed at her from the gates of hell. "Sweets lead to sin, Sister!" She cringed away from the sharp voice of Sister Jude in her mind and shook her head. "I can't. I mustn't indulge." Father Joseph had commended her on her abstinent lifestyle while living out of the order; she couldn't risk giving herself an inch of freedom and becoming a monster with her habits. She prayed the rosary twice a day, she attended mass faithfully, she did everything in her power to offer her service to those around her. God doesn't feel any closer than when I woke up in September. She bit the tip of her tongue. She loathed the train of thought, the wandering, empty path. No matter how she grappled with her prayers, she found nothing waiting for her, no holy light beaming from above to answer her prayers, no embrace of grace wrapping her up at night and protecting her. Instead, she had Lana's embrace. That alone is indulgent. She would never tell Father Joseph of her transgressions with Lana, how they settled within her, so right, so wholesome; she had confessed for inappropriate conduct more times than she liked to count (truly, she feared the priest at the parish tired of hearing her say it, and each time, he gave her the same number of prayers to request forgiveness), but she could never convince herself to stop. It was too good, the companionship Lana provided, the sweetness of her kisses and the touch of her smooth skin, the knot her arms formed around her in the middle of the night, the smell of her hair, the way their legs tangled up like dangling ropes and their bodies sought warmth from one another, only sheer nightgowns separating them. She adored Lana far too much to allow anything to pull them apart. Even my faith. Anything driving her away from her faith was wrong—but she felt most holy in Lana's arms. In Lana’s embrace, she knew she could feel God's love again, because Lana gave her the feelings God's love had once given her. Lana connected her to God more than anything Father Joseph said, more than any rosary, Bible, or saint medal.

A hand waved in front of her face. She blinked in surprise. "Hey. Earth to Sister Mary Eunice," summoned Lana, a tiny grin planted on her lips, concern crinkling the corners of her eyes. Mary Eunice focused on her face once more, drawn out of her theological musings. Her hand had dipped back into her pocket to fondle her rosary. It gave her comfort and strength, even when she confused herself. "Do you want me to get some of your snacks out of the trunk? You know, the ones that are… Catholic kosher."

Mary Eunice fought to shake herself from her reverie. "N-No, I'll—it's fine." Sister Mary Eunice. That was her name, but from Lana’s tongue, the full title settled like a heavy blanket on her shoulders and weighed her down. From Lana, she answered simply to Sister, or to Mary Eunice, but never the two together—and her favorite, sunshine, which related to neither her title nor her name but instead represented the intimacy forged between them. In comparison, her full
title seemed like a mouthful. But Lana had the familiar upward curl upon her lips, a certain light to her eyes in spite of the shadows surrounding their trip. "Are you sure you don't want it?"

"I'm sure. We can get some of the stuff out of the trunk on our next stop. Maybe we'll be farther south, and the parking lot won't be a damn skating rink."

Chuckling, she eyed the Snoball once more where it rested on the seat, innocuous in its existence but still forbidden. *You mustn't be ungrateful. Lana bought it for you.* She cleared her throat and lifted her head. "Thank you." She pinched it between delicate fingers; the marshmallow covering squished under her touch, its softness foreign, rivaled only by the texture of Lana's skin after she had lotioned her body fresh out of a shower at the end of the night. After twirling it between her fingers for a moment, marveling at it, she sank her teeth into it, tugging off the marshmallow shell and digging into the underlying chocolate and creme. *I don't know how long it's been since I've eaten one of these.*

Lana followed suit, each indulging their own sweet treat. The sugar melted on Mary Eunice's tongue, and she swallowed it like one would swallow cough syrup, bitter and thick, rather than the sweet delight which graced the soft insides of her mouth. "We all lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest." The Bible verse, cropping up out of nowhere in her mind, choked her throat from closing, and she fought to gulp down the remainder of the pastry whole and cracked open the bottle of water to help her purge the thick flavor from her tongue. Her stomach turned. *Don't puke! It's just a little cake! It isn't that big of a deal! It boiled inside her like all of her sins had come to life and sought to silence her by setting hell alight in her abdomen. She stifled a hiccup and swallowed again. The aftertaste refused to leave the back of her throat.

"Are you alright?" Lana pressed. She still had a bite of the cake pinched between her fingers. Mary Eunice nodded. "Are you sure? You're not choking?" She shook her head and gulped again. *I'm overreacting.* Her breath wanted to fly out of control, seeking freedom from her chest. She stuffed it down inside of her, keeping it steady. Lana's lips pursed downward with worry. "Okay," she agreed. She lifted a hand to Mary Eunice's jaw, the pad of her thumb less than an inch below her mouth. "Hold still, you've got a little creme…" The thumb slid upward, caressing the underside of her lower lip. An involuntary tremble passed through Mary Eunice. Her lips tingled. They buffered against one another in the empty air, seeking more contact with Lana's hand, more of the stimulation which made her short of breath and sent her stomach sailing through the open air, caught by the jet stream, by the headwinds, a pigeon battered by winds far too strong for its puny wings.

Catching Mary Eunice's eye, Lana paused. Mary Eunice licked her upper lip. *What's wrong with me? Why did Lana make her feel this way? Of course she loved Lana—she was in love with Lana, and she had confessed to that, and she tried her best to ignore it, but this strange tingling all over was new. Was it a byproduct of loving her romantically, rather than platonically? Was this how lovers felt about one another? I like it.* She exhaled and grinned, drawing her lips back over her teeth. As she relaxed, Lana returned the smile, and she leaned forward, breaking her hesitance. "Let me get it for you," she whispered.

Her lips seized Mary Eunice's. She suckled on Mary Eunice's bottom lip, grabbed it between her teeth like she handled something dainty as an eggshell, scraped her teeth over the soft, hot flesh inside Mary Eunice's lip. Her breath hitched. Her shoulders rolled up tight, and her hands balled up into tense fists, terror clutching her insides—pleasure, too, but the fear came first and shook her to her very bones. Lana released her lower lip with a distinct *pop.* "Hey." A hand covered hers and warmed it with the smooth skin. "Hey. Sunshine." Her brows knitted together, but Mary Eunice's mind skipped from the present to the past, the Monsignor gazing at her with a confused concern mirroring Lana's. "Sister." Lana squeezed the back of her hand. "What's going on?"
She jostled herself from her own mind. "I'm sorry." She apologized on reflex, a skill learned from Sister Jude, who expected an apology even when she did things right. "I—I just, I keep… not remembering, but there are shadows, I…" She averted her eyes and blinked hard. "I don't remember." *What don't I remember?* Her hand unflexed under Lana's grasp, and she flipped it over to interlock their fingers.

Their hands folded together like a worn bill tucking back into an old man's wallet, following the creases with ease. "I won't do it again," Lana promised.

Mary Eunice shook her head. "No!" Her dismay bled through with too much strength, and she winced, fighting to rein herself in. *She doesn't owe you anything. Calm down.* "No, that wasn't it. That was…" *It made me afraid, but it felt good. How can something be so scary and so good at the same time?* She swallowed the sudden dryness in her throat. Yes, it provoked terror inside her, but she loved Lana. She trusted Lana. "It was fine. I liked it."

Lana smoothed a hand over the back of hers to try and ease it, to make it loosen its tight grip where it had braced against the seat of the car. "You don't have to say that. You're allowed to tell me no, you know. I'll listen. I don't ever want to scare you. I only want to do what makes you comfortable—what makes you feel safe. Nothing else." Mary Eunice unfolded her hand, flattened it, so Lana could lace their fingers together like braided threads once more. "Do you understand? It's only fun if both of us enjoy it. You have different rules than I do. Respecting your boundaries is my first priority."

"I understand." Mary Eunice licked her lips, searching for the words to explain her situation, all of the gnarled emotions within her chest threatening to overflow into an incoherent heap. She sucked in a deep breath and considered her words before she spoke them, slow as honey running out of a jar. "I… I do have fears, but I trust you. I know you would do nothing to hurt me, and being with you makes me feel good." She paused, nibbling on her lower lip, not quite making eye contact. "Father Joseph told me it's important to have intimate friendships to foster an understanding of the self and a support system. You are that for me. And the way you make me feel… I think it's good. It's scary, because I've never had it before with anyone else, but I don't want it to stop. I will tell you if I do. *That was a load of inarticulate gibberish.*" Mary Eunice lifted her eyes nervously back to Lana's, afraid she hadn't made any sense at all.

Lana cradled her cheek in one hand. "You promise? If I do anything you don't like, you'll tell me to back off? No questions asked and no apologies given?" Mary Eunice nodded. "Promise," Lana prompted.

"I promise." Mary Eunice leaned into the embrace on her cheek, a happy cat nuzzling into her owner's palm, and as Lana tugged her hand away, Mary Eunice followed it and kissed Lana again, soft and sweet. *We're best friends. This is good. It's good for us to be comfortable with each other. There isn't anything wrong about this. It isn't sinful for us to care for each other.* Their lips shifted against one another's in a hot caress, skin on skin, saliva mingling from one mouth into the other, and when she severed, their parting mouths made a slight popping sound.

Their eyes connected. "Hop on the south interstate," Lana said. She stroked the back of Mary Eunice's hand. "We're taking it all the way down the coast. Are you sure you want to drive?"

"I'm sure," Mary Eunice advised. "Get some rest."

Hours hummed by her down the wide, open road; no lights except the headlights of the stray other vehicles, except for several times when Mary Eunice passed through cities taller than she ever could've fathomed. Snowflakes spattered down upon the windshield, and the wipers worked double time to keep the sight clear. Mary Eunice drove with slow caution. The road was mostly clear of ice, but she didn't want to risk hurting Lana or their car in some foolish attempt to reach
their destination faster. In the passenger seat, Lana slumped over with her head against the cold window. She grunted each time they bumped over something; each crack in the road jostled her head against the window.

Mary Eunice kept both eyes pinned on the road in front of her and reached across the seat to nudge Lana on the shoulder. "Lana," she urged in a quiet voice. "Lana, come here. You're exhausted. Put your head in my lap."

Rubbing her eyes with her fists, Lana perked up a little. Her brunette locks formed tangled heaps, whipped by the wind of traveling and the day's struggle. "I'm fine," she mumbled. "Tell me when you're ready for me to drive again..." She muffled a yawn with the palm of her hand.

"Don't be silly. You're in no condition to drive. That would be downright dangerous." Mary Eunice extended her arm, stealing a glance sideways at her; the deserted road remained unchanging. "Come here. You need to sleep." A shiver passed down Lana's shoulders and spine. "Are you warm enough?" The blanket Mary Eunice had brought laid wadded up between them, and she tossed it at Lana, covering her lap. "Lie down. It's only been six hours." I don't have any clue where we are. She couldn't remember the last state sign she had passed, if she had taken note of one at all; Lana had told her to travel south, so she did, pointed southward like a delayed bird fleeing the winter and catching up with the flock.

Lana hesitated a moment, big brown eyes darting up to her in the darkness of the car where only their faces were illuminated. She scooted over and curled up on the seat with a soft sigh fluttering from between her lips, settling her cheek on Mary Eunice's thigh and tugging the small blanket over her torso and limbs. "Thank you."

Curling her fingers in Lana's hair, Mary Eunice smiled. "Don't thank me, cupcake." She stroked the long, brown locks from Lana's eyes. "Are you warm? I can turn on the heat if you're chilled."

"I'm fine, sunshine," Lana whispered. Her skin was cool to the touch. Mary Eunice sucked her lower lip. She's sad. Lana's voice held the small, melancholy note. "Don't worry about me." She extended a hand to flick on the radio, bringing up a dull hum of drums fading to silence. As the noise fizzled through, she reclined deeper into Mary Eunice's lap, a quiet sigh fluttering from her nostrils. From below, her gaze pricked on Mary Eunice's chin, but she couldn't look away from the road long enough to make eye contact with her. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Lana."

Lana hesitated, biting her lower lip. "That isn't what I mean," she whispered, more to herself than to Mary Eunice, though the remark caught her off guard enough for her to glance back down at the face snuggled into her lap. She couldn't take the time to analyze Lana's features in the dark. Then what does she mean? She does love me, doesn't she? Lana had said it far too many times for Mary Eunice to doubt her now. All of the hair on the back of Mary Eunice's neck stood up under Lana's intense scrutinizing gaze.

She paused in the dark silence, hoping Lana would offer her own explanation, but she didn't. "What do you mean?" The dim silver moonlight of the crescent moon waning to nothing filtered into the car through the windshield and cast everything into a glow, the wintry stars magnified by the chill. Mary Eunice shivered. But I'm not cold because of the weather. Her soul shrank and hardened and froze at the prospect of losing Lana, losing her affection, losing this friendship.

The miles stretched before them, and a minute of silence followed; Lana exhaled through her nose. Her breath wasn't heavy, but short of the rumble of the motor, nothing else made a sound, and Mary Eunice's every synapse told of Lana—how Lana's body shifted against hers, how Lana's skin had cellulite and dimples and stretch marks, how Lana's face rested in her lap now.
Lana was the axis on which Mary Eunice revolved. "I guess that is right." Lana raised her voice to a bare whisper, just above the sigh she had exhaled moments before in volume. "I love you. Just the way you love me."

Her heart floundered. *No, you don't.* Her eyes misted over, and she struggled not to blink for fear of Lana seeing her cry; she couldn't risk fathoming an explanation for her tears this time. *You don't love me the way I love you. You love Wendy the way I love you. I'm sorry.* She carded her fingers through Lana's long, thick hair, unknotting a few tangles with her simple combing motion. "Get some sleep, cupcake." *I wish I could kiss her.* She couldn't bend over without distracting herself from the road ahead.

Lana placed her hand on the radio dial and cranked it up a little louder. "It's our song," she whispered, sleepy eyes cast downward. A distinct quiet drumbeat settled under the voices meeting in delectable harmony, words familiar from the record Barb and Lois had given Lana for her birthday—the record Lana and Mary Eunice made their background music for cleaning, for decorating, for cooking, for celebrating, for sharing a meal. "Listen. It's got a beat now. They added a drum set."

*Yeah. They did.* The tapping of the hi-hat sent goosebumps flaring down Mary Eunice's spine. Each beaming headlight from the opposite flowing interstate illuminated the words in her head. "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls and whispered in the sounds of silence." The last few heavy guitar strings strummed to completion, even and melancholy. Mary Eunice's stomach felt lighter in spite of the sorrowful message of the song; the familiarity of it grounded her. *What did Lana mean?* she wondered, nibbling on her lower lip. The urge to pick at her skin teased the back of her mind. She stroked Lana's hair instead. Uneven breaths whistled across her palm; Lana had fallen to sleep like a comfortable dog spread out in the summer sun. *She's so tired. She probably just confused herself. Like the night she was drunk.* Mary Eunice had fought hard to keep from remembering it, Lana confessing romantic feelings for her which couldn't possibly exist. After all, she had gone out to the bar, and she'd gone to bed with Rachel, and she hadn't said anything about it while sober; in fact, she didn't remember, and Mary Eunice had no intention of reminding her. *Hopefully she'll feel better after she gets a bit of sleep.*

The black, wintry clutches of Friday night bled into Saturday morning, the dawn sun orange in the sky, setting off everything in pink and red hues. The surrounding trees and grass bore no snow, only a heavy frost, and as Mary Eunice took an exit to a rest stop, she found the air chilled but not frigid. Her breath crafted ghosts in the space in front of her, and she took her coat from the back seat and folded herself deep into it before she called Gus and put on his leash to take him around the grass. "I bet you've gotta pee, don't you, buddy?" He wagged his skinny tail in response. "Me too." She led him out of the car, leaving Lana asleep in the front seat.

Around the front of the building, he led her, following all manner of enticing scents. He kept his nose planted to the ground and lifted his leg on everything he thought smelled interesting. "We're a long way from home, Gus," Mary Eunice whispered. From the copse of trees nearby, the birds trilled playful lullabies, flitting through the air. The dew licked off of the overgrown grass and onto her socks. "You've done enough. I've got to find the restroom for me. C'mon, you can come with me." *I'm not sure I would feel safe without you, actually.* Mary Eunice tightened her grip on the leash at the thought. Should she have left Lana alone in the car? She had locked the doors, but was that enough? *No one knows us here.* We've put several hundred miles and giant cities between us and Boston. *She's not in danger.* But Mary Eunice knew some forms of danger weren't derived from Lana's fame or her sexuality; some of them laid in wait because she was a woman, and right now, she was a woman asleep, alone, in a locked car—practically a sitting duck. Mary Eunice gulped at the thought.
She tugged Gus around to the bathrooms and, with some struggle, managed to fit both of them in the tight stall, though his tail was on the other side of the door, and his paws peeked out from either wall. *This isn't the most uncomfortable way I've ever gone to the bathroom.* She didn't think she would ever lose the horror of trying to share a restroom with four younger children and one adult woman who needed a solid hour to apply all of her makeup. The moment of relieving herself never came with any privacy.

As she exited the stall and went to the sinks, Gus's leash looped over her wrist, someone coughed just outside the entrance to the restroom. She flinched. Gus straightened his back and perked his ears. "Don't worry, boy," Mary Eunice whispered to him, tugging on his collar; he was hardly intimidating, anyway, with his head in that cone to keep him from licking his stitches. *Don't panic. This is a public restroom. There are going to be other people around.* She stuck her hands under the running water in the sink and soaped all the way up to the wrists, the way she had learned when she first joined Briarcliff to kill the most germs possible (though, at Briarcliff, the point was moot, as they didn't often have enough soap for the bathrooms and sometimes went without in the kitchen). Drying them with a paper towel, she tiptoed out of the bathroom.

To her right, at the front of the souvenir building, stood a woman holding a cigarette to her lips. She wore a knee-length dark green skirt and matching jacket. *It's a woman.* Mary Eunice found this news comforting; she eased, letting the tension roll from her. She doubted she had much to fear from this woman. A name tag was pinned to the front of the woman's jacket, but Mary Eunice couldn't make it out. She cleared her throat as she approached the stranger. "Excuse me, miss?" she prompted.

The woman lifted her head at the prompting words. "Hey," she greeted, a grin spreading across her lips. The word had a certain long drawl attached to it, an unfamiliar twang Mary Eunice had never heard before, especially around Boston. "What can I help you with?" The stranger appraised Gus for a moment, but he paid her no mind; as Mary Eunice trusted her, so did he.

"I—I was just wondering where we are."

Chuckling, the woman nodded. "Figures. You don't sound like you're from around here. Boston?" Mary Eunice blushed as she agreed. "Geez Louise. How was DC?"

Mary Eunice blinked. *DC?* She had driven through quite a few cities, some much more confusing than others, some much more lively than others—she had prayed for guidance almost nonstop since Lana drifted off to sleep in her lap, and more than once, she had almost woken Lana for her fear of navigating the bright lights, tall buildings, and crowded roads. But none of them had seemed like the nation's capital. "It… It was okay, I guess." Which one was DC? She didn't have a clue.

"Smart, traveling through it at night. Every interstate ever goes straight through it. Gets super backed up this time of year." The woman blew a long ring of smoke into the chilly air, gray and mingling with the steam elicited by her breath. "You're outside Lake Ridge." At Mary Eunice's questioning look, she elaborated, "Virginia, sweetie, you're in northern Virginia." She gave a lopsided grin. *She's missing a few teeth.* "Where you headed, darling?"

"Uh—Georgia." I don't know where in Georgia, though. She thought Lana had specified southern Georgia once, but Mary Eunice couldn't remember exactly what she had said about her past. Of all the cities in Georgia, Mary Eunice only knew of Atlanta. In a small, meek voice, she asked, "How much longer do we have to go?"

The woman shrugged. "I dunno, hours wise. Depends how fast you drive and how often you and your dog gotta pee. But you've gotta make it through the rest of Virginia, then the Carolinas, and you'll cross the border into Georgia from South Carolina. Whole trip—well, it's about six hundred
miles, I'd wager. Maybe closer to seven hundred, but no more than that." She flicked the butts of her cigarette onto the ground and scrubbed out the gray with the toe of one flat shoe, and then she smoothed down her skirt. "You're going an awful long way from Boston. You do this every Christmas? That's, like—hell, that's close to twelve hundred miles, ain't it?"

Mary Eunice shrugged. "I don't know," she said, meek and small in her uncertainty. "I'm going with my friend. She hasn't seen her family for... quite a few years." Fifteen years. More than half of my life, that's how long it's been since Lana saw her family last. She last saw them when I was twelve years old.

"You must be a mighty fine friend." The woman offered a broad grin in response to Mary Eunice, and her face heated in response to the compliment; she averted her eyes. We're very good friends, yes, wouldn't quite come to her tongue. "Come inside, buttercup. Company is offering complementary coffee and hot chocolate all the days of holiday travels, hoping to lure people in. Ain't nobody around, you can bring your dog. Nobody'll care." She held open the door to the souvenir shop. Mary Eunice hesitated. "Come on, then!" At the prompting, she ducked after the stranger into the well-lit room filled with glass cases, magnets, postcards, hats, T-shirts, all an assortment of things she should have expected to find in a tourist trap near Washington, DC. Washington, DC. I was in Washington, DC, and I didn't even know it! I drove through the country's capital and didn't realize it! Am I blind?

"What d'ya want, sugar? Coffee or hot chocolate?"

Mary Eunice withdrew from her own mind at the sharp words. "Oh—I can't, thank you. I'm not allowed. But... Lana will probably want a coffee."

"Not allowed?" The woman's brow furrowed as she filled the styrofoam cup with coffee and secured a lid over it with a stirrer. "You're too old to be in school or have your mama breathing down your neck. What on earth is gonna bite you if you decide to have a cup o' joe?"

"It's—it's against my faith." She paused at the explanation, wondering if it made sense standing alone. Probably not. "I mean—not coffee, per se, but indulgence. I don't allow myself sweets for my faith."

The woman handed her the warm cup of coffee over the counter. Mary Eunice wrapped her delicate fingers around it. The heat trickled into her cold palm and leapt into her bloodstream; the scent reminded her of Lana, how often it clung to her breath the mornings after she awoke screeching from a nightmare in the middle of the night and struggled to find any peace in her remaining sleep. She glanced back up at the woman, prepared to thank her, but the stranger arched an eyebrow at her, incredulity written upon her face. "Y'ain't one of them Ku Klux Klan people, are you?"

Mary Eunice's eyes widened. "I—I—" The question took her aback so much, she lost her words to negate the suspicions. Her lack of explanation made the woman's eyes widen in turn, fearful of the suspected Klan member. "No! No, no, definitely not." She lowered her voice, eyes darting around the room, but the souvenir shop was vacant of all other people. "I'm Catholic. I'm a—a nun, actually. Why doesn't it flow anymore? She once had no problem telling anyone of her position in the church. It was, after all, her job, and just as a teacher did not hesitate in saying she taught children, Mary Eunice never saw reason to dodge around her career path. But now, it stuck in her throat. Am I ashamed? No, she couldn't possibly be ashamed of her faith. Afraid. The word made her emotions curdle in her chest, aligning with the quickening pace of her heart. Since becoming Lana's friend, society placed a target on her back. Now, she lived in fear of those who would hurt Lana and who would hurt her because of her proximity to Lana. But I don't regret anything. She had promised Lana months ago; she had made her peace with the
implications of their friendship. If someone decided to hurt her, she hoped she didn't suffer too long, and she hoped Lana was safe. She lifted her eyes from the top of the cup to look at the woman again, pressing a nervous smile upon her lips. "You don't look like any nun I've ever seen before. Not that I've seen many, but none of them looked like you."

"Oh—" Mary Eunice glanced down at her clothing, the long skirt and black stockings underneath, the wrinkled sweater on its second day of wear, the coat mismatched with everything else and dangling from her like a snake shedding its skin. "I'm plainclothes most of the time. I've only got a solemn habit, so I save it for church." Gus bumped up against her hip with his wet nose, giving a soft whine.

I've stayed too long. Lana is alone in the car. I need to go back out to her. We need to get back on the road. If they made it only to find Lana's father had already passed… Her heart broke at the prospect. "Miss?" she asked, a final question probing her mind. "The—The KKK. Are there those types of people around here?" Her stomach twisted. She knew the KKK didn't like Catholics, but the thought of what such people could do to Lana if they found out… The notion sickened her.

"There are those types of people everywhere, Sister." The woman's smile disappeared, sombre at the corners of her mouth. "Take care of yourself. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you, Miss."

The rising morning sun heated the air. Her exhaled breaths no longer sent fat ghosts stretching out in front of her, but rather, narrow gray wisps fled her tongue. As she approached the car, she peeked inside; Lana was still sprawled across the seat, fast asleep. Mary Eunice unlocked the back door and loaded Gus, and then she eased into the spot beside Lana. Tiredness had begun to wear on her, but she didn't want to wake Lana any sooner than she had to. She's going to have to go to the bathroom, and she'll have to eat something soon. With some regret, she nudged the sleeping woman. "Lana," she prompted, smoothing her hand over the other's face. She's so peaceful when she's asleep. The troubled lines framing her lips and eyes never vanished, but when she slept, they faded, discernible to Mary Eunice because she knew where to find them on Lana's strained face. She tugged the brunette locks out of Lana's face. A few strings of silver mixed into brown puddle. Mary Eunice lifted one between her thumb and index finger, studying it in the glinting light. Did she have these before Bloody Face? Did he give her these, like everything else he left on her body? "Lana, cupcake, you need to wake up now."

Lana turned her head and opened one eye, caught halfway through a snore. "Mm…?" She blinked and lifted a fist to rub the crusts of sleep from her eyes. "Sunshine? What—What time is it? Where are we?" She pushed herself up and surveyed the bright light outside. "Good lord, I slept for hours!"

"Relax." Mary Eunice offered her the hot cup of coffee, and Lana accepted it with a mumble of thanks. "We're in northern Virginia. I asked the woman inside the rest stop."

Lana's eyes narrowed. "You drove through Washington, DC?" she asked, jaw hanging somewhat slack. She blinked hard once, as if to orient herself again. "And Baltimore?"

Mary Eunice chuckled, and she shook her head. "I guess I did. I didn't have any clue where I was the whole time, but… You said to stay on the interstate, so I did." I drove through the capital of the nation and didn't even realize it. I wasn't paying very much attention to anything. "I didn't know I was in Washington. It was just another big, busy city with too many lights and big buildings. I didn't see the Statue of Liberty or anything." She reflected on the tall buildings she'd emerged from just a few hours ago—long enough for her blood pressure and pulse to return to ordinary levels. Sipping from the coffee, Lana's mouth twisted. Out of the side of her mouth, she mumbled, "The
Statue of Liberty is in New York." Oh. Mary Eunice flushed in embarrassment. Of course, stupid. You didn't see it because it's not there. Washington, DC is where the President's house is, not the Statue of Liberty. It gave her pause, the idea she had passed through the same city where President Johnson lived and worked; she had passed through the same city where all of the presidents had lived at some point in their lives. She was so small, so insignificant, compared to the great feats they had accomplished, yet she still drew so near to the place all of the great things had happened. "We passed it yesterday, when you were asleep. Good god, I can't believe you drove through DC—without a license, no less." She hiccuped. "I've got to pee. I slept for, like, twelve hours—what time is it?"

"It's eight-thirty. I can drive a little farther if you don't want to yet. I'm really not tired." Hungry, though. She fumbled around for the bottle of water which she had dropped sometime earlier in one of the cities and hadn't bothered to retrieve since. "The bathrooms are over there." She gestured vaguely toward the public, open restrooms to the right of the souvenir shop.

Lana muffled a yawn with the palm of her hand. "Alright. Lock the doors after me. I'll grab our breakfast from the vending machine—no sweets, I know. I promise to listen this time." She stretched out long, both arms sprawled to their longest in either direction, and then she arched her back. It cracked once. She winced. "This roadtrip is making me stiff. I feel old." Mary Eunice opened her mouth to defend Lana, but she slid out of the car and closed the door in her wake before Mary Eunice could offer her thoughts on Lana's age. She does have those silver hairs, but she isn't old. She's not there yet. Her hands clenched in her lap where she sat. Lana was beautiful; it didn't matter how old she was. Mary Eunice loved her.

Gus stuck his head over the seat, whining. "I see you, buddy." She peered back down at his bowl in the floor; it still had half of its kibbles. The water bowl had spilled a few times, but it had enough for him to drink from. "Just want some attention, don't you, Gus?" She scratched behind his ears, and he leaned into the caress, long tongue dribbling drool all over her arm from his saggy lips. "Don't worry. Once we get there, it'll be time for you to get your stitches out. It'll be nice and easy, and you won't have to wear the cone anymore. I'm sure that's got to be irritating. I wouldn't want a cone around my head all the time, either." He licked his lips and thrust his muzzle forward to lick her cheeks. She crinkled up her face, but she didn't pull away. "Your breath stinks."

Lana came back across the parking lot, goosebumps all over her exposed arms; she hadn't donned a coat before leaving the car. Mary Eunice unlocked the doors so Lana could reenter. "We've got some trail mix and peanuts. Some good stuff to get us through." She poured the trail max freely into it. "Thanks." She picked through the peanuts and sunflower seeds and pretzels, leaving the M&Ms and raisins behind. Oh, don't be a baby. Eat the raisins. She chewed them with her back teeth, trying not to taste them.

"You don't like raisins, either?" Mary Eunice shook her head. "I hate them. Wendy used to eat all of them, because she knew I would spend the whole bag of trail mix dodging them." She cast her eyes downward, a mist crossing her face. Oh, dear. Mary Eunice's heart sank at the abrupt melancholy written there upon Lana's expression, reading as clear as any chapter of her book. Lana rolled a raisin between her fingertips. "I never thought I'd be coming here," she mumbled, hoarse where she restrained her tears. "But… if I did, I would've imagined coming with her." A
heavy sigh fluttered from between her parted lips, and she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, smearing away tears before they fell from her misty eyes filled to the brim. "This whole season has been weird. Doing these things without her. It's like I'm empty. I'm just a puppet going through the motions of living without her."

Mary Eunice's appetite vanished. "I'm sorry, Lana," she whispered, because she knew nothing else she could say. More than once, she had lamented her inability to bring Wendy back, to take her place. "She should be here with you."

Lana wiped her eyes again. Her tears wouldn't stop falling no matter how she dashed them away. "No—Don't be sorry. It's not your fault. I'm glad you're here. You make me happy." She scooted closer to Mary Eunice. Happy. The word echoed in Mary Eunice's head. Lana had known such a good life before Bloody Face, before Briarcliff, with Wendy; how could she now consider anything happiness? "You give me hope that—that maybe, one day, things will be better again. Not the same, but... better than they are sometimes, without her." She kept dabbing away at the corners of her eyes. "If anyone ever loves me the same way Wendy did, it'll be more than I deserve. I won't have that again. But you make me think maybe—maybe I could have something, even if it's not something perfect."

Someone does love you the same way Wendy did. Mary Eunice stroked Lana's cheek with her free hand, the other filled with trail mix. I do. I love you like that. I love you more than anything else. "You deserve everything anyone can give you," she murmured, "and more."

A soft, wry chuckle rose from Lana, and she leaned against Mary Eunice, their bodies pressing flush against one another. "Thank you for coming with me."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

Lana kissed her, tongue and lips grinding against her hard; the harsh winter air had chapped both of their mouths, leaving them dry and itchy, but when Lana retreated, Mary Eunice found the heat bleeding all over her face like Lana had set a fire in the pit of her stomach and waited for the warmth to spread in her bloodstream. Her hand trembled. A few raisins fell from her palm. Lana plucked them up out of the seat and, pinching them between her fingertips, lifted them to Mary Eunice's lips. Raisins never looked so delicious. She opened her mouth into a small O. Lana slipped her fingers inside to the first knuckle and dropped the raisins onto her tongue, but they lingered, so Mary Eunice closed her lips around them and left wet streaks on her fingernails. "I thought you didn't like raisins," Lana whispered. Mary Eunice swallowed them like pills, trying not to taste them too much. "Still no?"

"Definitely not."

Tossing her head back in a laugh, Lana kissed her again, light and sweet, and she sat there beside Mary Eunice rather than scooting back over to press against the passenger door. I could drive like this for days. And I don't even like driving.

... 

Late Sunday evening, Mary Eunice stared down the long road before her, framed on either side by forest, as the air in the hub of the car crackled with unspoken tension. Gus panted in the backseat and slurped from his water bowl with his tongue flapping in all directions. Where are we? Lana had told her to take an exit over an hour ago, and she had offered a few instructions which led to this winding, one-lane dirt road stretched out before them, but she did not speak otherwise. She cast her gaze out the side window, gaze examining the looming trees and the shrouds of blackness held within them. Mary Eunice didn't dare interrupt her reverie. We're getting close. They had crossed the border into Georgia several hours ago, but until now, she hadn't sensed the nearness of
this place in Lana's demeanor. *It's coming.* Her stomach quivered with fearful anticipation. Did these people want them here? Would they respect Lana, the sacrifice she had made to travel all the way here to see her father before his passing? Would they honor any of the losses she had experienced in Boston? *Will they even let me in?* Somehow, she doubted Lana had mentioned her company on the phone with her sister.

The car approached an intersection in the distance. No street lamps illuminated the clay road; only the headlights reflected off of the stop sign in the distance. "There's a gas station on the right up here," Lana said. "Pull over in the parking lot. You'll want to put on your habit now." _We're that close._ Mary Eunice turned into the parking lot, a simple spread of gravel flung up by the tires. The headlights beamed onto the building. No gas pumps decorated the parking lot, and the roof of the building had caved in, draping over the tilted foundation like a wrinkly blanket. "There was a gas station here," Lana muttered.

When they slammed their doors shut, a hoard of bats upstarted from the roof of the dilapidated gas station. "It's warm out here," Mary Eunice observed. Lana opened the trunk of the car and unzipped the suitcase. _Too warm._ Crickets wheezed in the outline of trees just a few yards beyond them, unlike any of the chirping insects she had ever heard in Boston; they mirrored the wildlife in the forest behind Briarcliff where the raspers lay in wait. Mary Eunice's heart fluttered in her chest at the thought. She whirled back to where Lana sorted through the clothing in the suitcase. A dull silver metal glinted in Lana's hand. "What is that?" Lana stiffened, eyes widening, and she shuffled to the right, stuffing the gun under her shirt, but the movement only made the shape more clear to Mary Eunice. "Lana! What are you going to do with that? Why did you bring it?" Her breath hitched, voice clawing up the octave with stress.

Lana's eyebrows knitted together. "I'm not going to _do_ anything with it." She held Mary Eunice's gaze in earnest, seeking understanding, fear written in all of the shadows of her face. The night sky held no moon; the starlight alone glinted in her brown eyes and made her glimmering and ethereal. "It's just in case I have to protect us. That's all. If someone comes out of the house with a gun—I'm not going to curl up and hope I don't get hit. I'm going to shoot first. And I have a lot better aim than any of them."

_God, guide our path. Don't bring us in harm's way._ "I understand." Lana tucked the barrel of the gun into her pocket like a holster, butt jutting out of her skirt. _I don't understand how someone's family can do this to them. I don't understand how they raised you, you of all people, and decided this is how they want to treat you. I don't understand how no one could see how amazing you are._ Lana tugged the long black habit from under the other garments they'd packed, and Mary Eunice buttoned it up over her sweater and her skirt. Lana draped her coif and veil over her head.

Mary Eunice adjusted them, and then she slipped her rosary into the pocket of her habit, rolling it between her fingers. _In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost._

Lana took up behind the wheel of the car while Mary Eunice prayed in reverent silence, head bowed down to the stare at the black floorboards. Not even shadows shifted down there. The darkness of the forest swallowed everything light, everything bright, everything holy. _This is how I felt trapped in my own head._ She coughed hard and pinched her upper arm, praying with increased speed and fervor. Her rosary flew by, mind rattling words like a normal person recalled the alphabet or their home address. Each prayer uttered in her mind, whispered up to the heavens, offered some semblance of comfort for her—some, but not enough. Beside her, Lana's breath increased its speed. It whistled in and out of her nose. Mary Eunice peeked sideways at her; her hands trembled on the steering wheel. _No, this can't be happening._ It interrupted her prayer, the dark thought. _She needs her medication, and she can't take that while she's driving._ Oh, c'mon, Mary, focus. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.
The heavy breaths from behind the wheel stuttered. "Can you do that out loud?" Lana requested.

Mary Eunice hesitated. "You mean pray?" she asked meekly, the rosary wrapped so tightly around her hand, her fingers began to discolor.

"Yes. Just—wherever you were, don't feel like you need to start over. I don't mean to interrupt, I just—" She paused and inhaled, deep and long, to force her breath to slow. "I need to hear your voice right now."

Mary Eunice cleared her throat. "Of course." I'll give you whatever you need, Lana. I promise. I'll give you my whole life. "O my Jesus, forgive us of our sins. Save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls into heaven, especially those in most need of thy mercy. Amen." She rolled the beads between her fingers. Keep us safe, please. "The second glorious mystery: the ascension of our Lord into heaven." She paused, not a buffer in memory, but an image brought forth by announcing the mystery—kneeling beside Pepper and praying these same words, kneeling at home and reading them from a book to the other children, sitting beside Aunt Celest and hearing her silence as the rest of the church echoed the priest's words. "Jesus remains on earth forty days after His Resurrection to prove He has truly risen from the dead. He commissions the apostles to preach the gospel to every creature, and promises to be with them forever." I want to be with Lana forever. Is that wrong? She couldn't bring herself to meditate on the mystery, in spite of the purpose of announcing it. "He will not leave them orphans, but will send the Holy Spirit to enlighten and strengthen them." We won't be orphans. God will protect us. "Jesus proceeds to Mt. Olivet accompanied by His Mother and the apostles and disciples. Extending His pierced hands over all in a last blessing, He ascends into heaven. As He ascends a cloud takes Him from their sight. Jesus ascends to take His place at the right hand of the Father."

She chewed on the inside of her cheek. Lana's breath had evened out somewhat. "What jubilation there must be amid the angels of heaven at the triumphant entry of Jesus. The wounds in His glorified body are an endless plea before the Father on our behalf. The disciples leave Mt. Olivet and return to Jerusalem with great joy." She glanced to Lana's face out of the corner of her eye. The eyes were fixed on the road ahead. Give her strength. Please, give her strength. Let her face this, and let me support her faithfully. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen."

Perhaps all of this was a temptation; perhaps Lana was a temptation in herself, leading Mary Eunice astray. But she couldn't fathom a world where Lana had never taken her in. I don't know where I would be without her. She is a blessing. She shut her eyes tight. Deliver us from evil. Protect Lana. She gave up so much to came here. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen." She clutched the rosary tighter in her fist, and she repeated, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb…"

To her credit, Lana didn't interrupt her chanting the decade of Hail Marys. After the third one, her lips buffered along in silent utterances; she didn't put her voice to the prayer, but she let the rhythm carry her away, allowed it to provide the same comfort to her Mary Eunice had sought for years—the comfort of sharing something with someone, even if the someone was God.

The car turned up a narrow drive, and Mary Eunice sputtered into silence. The silhouette of a small house stood against the sky in the distance, surrounded by the woodland which covered the landscape. Lana paused, eyes cast off to the side at a small, glowing bead. As the car halted, a long-legged doe stepped out onto the narrow clay path with a fawn at her side—the headlights of
the car reflected in her eyes, glowing marbles. "Wow," Mary Eunice whispered, not intending to let it escape. She had seen deer before, of course, but never so close; these left almost no space between their lanky brown bodies and the bumper of the car, gazing right at her with round eyes and large ears.

"There are more." Lana nodded off to the left. A whole herd, five or six more does, followed the first in a single-file line, all of them glancing at the people in the car and considering their little trot to freedom. "They're all over the place here."

"They're beautiful."

Lana hummed, a muted response. She lingered with her gaze on the road before her, but then she faced Mary Eunice. "So are you." The compliment caught the air in Mary Eunice's throat so her vocal cords sputtered like a stalling engine and her lips melted into an assortment of unfathomable shapes, contorting ways she wouldn't have dreamed possible. Her response, her inability to form anything coherent, gave Lana small smile creased upon her lips. "I love you."

You're beautiful, too! tangled with, I love you, too! in her mouth, but before she could manage either of them, Lana's soft lips pressed against hers, tender and sweet. None of the heat fizzled between them now; Lana latched onto her out of need, seeking comfort, seeking reprieve, and Mary Eunice offered it in turn, wrapping her arms around Lana's dimpled frame. Once Lana's lips slipped from hers, she buried her face in the other's neck and clutched her, letting her sweet scent waft all over her. "I love you, too, Lana. Cupcake."

Lana smoothed down her veil with one hand, like she wanted to stroke her hair but couldn't quite access it through the layers of solemn black fabric. "Don't call me that in front of my family."

Mary Eunice giggled, shaking her head. "I wouldn't dream of it." Lana slipped from her arms, sand between her fingers. This is the last time I'll get to hold her. They had no clue how long they would be here, but she knew she could not risk embracing Lana in front of her family the way they did at home. No more hugs. No more cuddles. No more kisses. The losses stabbed her like knives planted into her gut. I want to do it one more time. I want to know I made it count. She grasped Lana's hand with a light squeeze, folding their fingers together, mountain and valley, the way they both likes best. "Could we—" The request stuck under her tongue. "Could we kiss one more time?"

Grinning crinkles appeared beside the dark brown eyes; they glimmered with tears, and Lana dove into another kiss with reckless abandon. Hands slid up Mary Eunice's waist over the heavy cloth of her habit and explored the curve of her spine, wandering up her shoulder blades. I wish I weren't wearing anything. The notion struck Mary Eunice out of nowhere, and a flaming blush hotter than any she had experienced before itched all over her. She thanked the new moon for obscuring her discoloration from view. Why? It doesn't make any sense. Why do I wish she were touching me while I'm naked? Mary Eunice couldn't dream of an answer.

A cool breath fanned across her face. Why did I pull away? She didn't realize she had until she thought about it. But she had. Why would she do that? Lana was all she had ever wanted. Why would she put a stop to the affection now? Because I'm not indulgent. She had a taste, a final taste, to hold and remember for as long as they stayed here. Lana cradled her cheek in one hand. "Thank you," Mary Eunice croaked.

"The pleasure is mine." Lana kissed her fingertips and pressed them to Mary Eunice's lips. "If something happens, I want you to run. Alright? Back to the car, as fast as you can. Don't worry about me."

"You know I can't do that."
"I have a gun. I can protect myself. I want you and Gus to be safe." Mary Eunice held her gaze, shaking her head. *I won't.* She could never abandon Lana—not for anything in the world. Not to save her own life. "You've already risked too much for me. I want you—" Lana swallowed hard, aloud, banishing the lump in her throat but not the tight hoarseness to her voice. "I want you to promise me you'll run away. And if something happens to me, you'll drive away. Please."

Mary Eunice set her jaw. "I told you," she whispered, "I've made my peace with what being your friend could mean for me." *Friend. The only one I've ever had.* "I won't leave you. It doesn't matter what you say. You can't change my mind."

"God, Mary, please—"

"I said no." The firm tone to her voice surprised her; she didn't think she had ever stood by herself before, by her own word, by her own beliefs. *Lana deserves this.* "I won't do it. And I won't make an empty promise, either. *I've never felt like this before.* Fear curdled in her belly, but no trembles circulated through her fingers. She was terrified, but she was steady.

The starlight reflected on the tear on Lana's cheek, and Mary Eunice reached to dab it away with the pad of her thumb, heart wrenching at the sight. "I don't want someone else to die for me. Because of me." Lana closed both eyes tight, and twin tears slipped from them, and Mary Eunice reached to wipe them away, but Lana batted her away. "Please, I'm begging you. Don't do anything foolish for me. I know you're a goddamn martyr, but please…"

*I promised her I would give her anything.* Mary Eunice's heart skipped a beat, guilt gnarling her insides. But she couldn't change her resolve. *I would give her anything. Anything but this.* She rubbed her thumb over one of Lana's cheekbones and planted a gentle kiss upon her lips. Lana wrapped around her in return, a monkey clinging to a branch, and she shivered and wept. Her lips tasted like wet salt. Lana hid her face in the crook of her neck and shuddered from head to toe. "Lana…” Mary Eunice kissed her neck. Lana hiccuped. "I love you." Heat blossomed behind her eyes. *Dear God, please keep us safe. Give Lana strength. Don't hurt her because of my unfaithful heart.* The trembles passed from Lana's body into her own. *Give her and her family a forgiving spirit. Give me—Give me just a shred of wisdom. Please. *Don't ever forget it.*"

Lana pecked her on the mouth again. *How many last kisses are we going to exchange?* Somehow, Mary Eunice sensed she would not receive another one; this one rang with finality. "I love you, too." Lana dried her cheeks with the back of her hands. She shifted the car into gear again, and they rolled down the deserted road toward the silhouette of the house.

One light peeked out through a window, and the curtains rustled. A face appeared through the glass—familiar to Mary Eunice, shaped just like Lana's. "Keep Gus on his leash," Lana whispered. She parked far back from the house, away from the pickup truck and other car parked off to the side on the clay drive. Mary Eunice nodded and smoothed down her veil, tucking the last strands of her hair beneath her coif. The porchlight blinked on, surrounded by a cloud of moths, and the open door framed a dark silhouette. *Saint Michael Archangel, defend us in battle, be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil…*

The engine died, and the silence left Mary Eunice's heart and blood humming like the inside of a beehive. Lana opened her door first. Mary Eunice followed, eyes darting back to Lana, to the porch, but neither she nor the figure moved. She opened the back door. Gus jumped out and lifted his leg on the back tire, pink tongue lolling about, panting with the cool, humid southern air. She tugged him by the collar, and they both flanked Lana. Gus sank back onto his haunches, but his skinny tail kept whipping the air with pleasure.

Lana gazed out at the figure, both familiar and changed; she recognized her sister, but Frieda had
changed, as well. Her gait shifted, strides wide and long. A cool breeze wafted from between the trees, stirring the trunks into creaking, and the dry leaves at the bottom of the forest skittered out onto the overgrown lawn. "Lana!" Frieda's footfalls slapped the earth, barren and flat, like they had all done as kids, paying no heed to pine needles or the spiky seeds of the sweet gum trees. She glanced sideways to Mary Eunice and took a tiny step, a minuscule inch, away from her. *I wish I could hold her hand.*

Frieda's racing ended with a collision, body on body, arms twisting around her. "God, Lana, I missed you so much!" Frieda's round, firm abdomen jutted into her and pressed against hers. *She's pregnant.* Lana didn't know what she had expected. They had grown up. Of course the others would have spread out and started their own families—just as she would have done with Wendy, if they had had the opportunity. "I'm so glad you came." Frieda sniffed, long and hard, and she withdrew, studying Lana's face in the starlight. "Thank you."

Her tears glistened on her cheeks. "I never could stand to hear you cry." Lana licked her thumb and wiped away the few shed droplets.

Shaking her head, Frieda laughed, light and breathless, like the sprint had exhausted her. "I wish there was someone you could punch to make it all better this time—like you used to." She took Lana by the hand and tugged her away from the car, toward the house. Silent as a shadow, Mary Eunice tiptoed a few steps behind, clutching Gus's leash tight. "C'mon—C'mon. Roger's at the hospital, but Tim and Mama are here. Timmy said he would take you there as soon as you came." With her other hand, she wiped the streaks of wetness from her cheeks. "They're saying he won't make it until Christmas."

A shiver trickled down her spine like Frieda had dropped ice cubes down the back of her shirt. She had last seen her father at his peak—tall, strong, nearing retirement from the mill but not quite there yet, domineering in spite of the growing bald spot and silvery mop of remaining hair on his head. In her mind, he remained a giant with a switch in his hand. The prospect of him dying... How was it possible? "None of us told him you were coming. We were afraid—We were afraid he wouldn't make it until you got here, or you would have car trouble, or—or any of it, we didn't want to go back on our word."

"That's okay." Lana's voice was numb. She swallowed hard; the inside of her mouth had dried. "It's okay, I'll go see him, I promise." *I sure as shit didn't drive this far not to go see him.* Her heart cringed at the stern thoughts.

Bathed in the yellow porchlight, they stood below the wooden deck like sinners at the throne of God. Her breath hitched in her throat. *I hope Mary Eunice is praying right now.* She glanced sideways to her silent companion, pale and shivering, hand tied up in Gus's leash; Frieda hadn't yet acknowledged her, and Lana found words hard to come by. Timothy emerged from the house first. "Lana!" He jumped off of the deck and hugged her tight. The scent of sweat clung to him. She stiffened and tried to push back away from him, but he paid her no mind. "I missed you. It's so good to see you." He held her at arm's length and examined her like a specimen under a microscope. *Why are they all staring?* "You haven't aged a day since 1950!"

Lana inclined her eyebrows as she struggled to brush his hands off of her arms. "I must've been a wrinkly, gray nineteen-year-old," she muttered, more to herself than to him, but Timothy laughed at her whispered words.

An unfamiliar man followed, a lanky figure with thick, dark hair and much more cologne than suited a man so far from any civilization. Frieda slipped away and burrowed herself in his arms. *Her husband.* Lana pursed her lips as she reevaluated the gangly man. *She could do better.* She bit down on the tip of her tongue to keep from speaking the words aloud; they would certainly have her tossed out of the house before she set foot inside. Frieda kissed the man once,
and then she faced them again. "This is my husband, John." She scanned him. "Where's the baby?"

Behind them, in the bit of the living room Lana could see, several young children dotted the scene. Are those all hers? "Pleasure," Lana said, somewhat flat in her tone. Can't be. They must be Timothy's or Roger's.

John lifted a hand in greeting, but he didn't linger on her. "Your mother has him." He turned his head back and called into the house, "Kids! Come out here! Terry, get the twins."

"John, it's past their bedtime!" Frieda scowled. "What are they doing up?" She peered back into the house. "All of them? I just got them to sleep an hour ago!"

"Terry woke up when she heard your mother crying, Bruce followed her, Cindy followed him, and Sue and Stuart were afraid to be alone." Frieda rolled her eyes skyward. "Honey, we've stuffed them all in that little room. When they wake up, it's like dominoes. One falls, and they're all awake!"

A string of children filed through the door into the lamplight beneath the stars, all clad in pajamas and rubbing their eyes. "Daddy..." The oldest, a girl, led two toddlers by the hands. "Daddy, we're tired." Her voice contained the sweet southern drawl of a belle raised in the church. "Can't you tell us a story?"

"Oh, pumpkin, Daddy's all out of stories. I'm sure Mama will have one for you."

Frieda cleared her throat and straightened her back, gravid middle protruding as she leaned back on her heels. "These are my kids." All of them? Lana's jaw hung slack at the information. "Teresa is six." The oldest waved one small hand. "Bruce is five." He yawned, eyes hanging closed where he stood. "Cindy is three." She had her thumb stuffed in her mouth. "Sue and Stuart are two."

One of them, the boy, flopped back onto his rump and began to wail. Frieda grimaced. John scooped him up and bounced him on his hip. "Rex is inside, with Granny—he's eight months."

The toddler's cries quieted into another yawn. He's too tired to cry. This hasn't been easy on any of them. "And..." Frieda smoothed another hand over her gravid stomach. "Two more on the way. I'm due in late March."

Lana's eyes fluttered wide. Before she could say anything, John snorted, raising his eyebrows. "At least the doctor gave us a warning on the twins this time. The last time, 'Uh-oh, looks like another one's coming out!'"

Frieda stared at him. "Yes," she said in a monotone, "I'm sure it was quite traumatizing for you to stand back and observe. I can't imagine how much pain you were in." She cast her gaze back out to Lana and exhaled through her nose in a patient flare.

"Eight kids." Lana hadn't planned on saying it aloud, but it emerged, nonetheless. "That's eight kids," she repeated, like the math would change if she said it twice. It didn't. Who the fuck decides to settle down and have eight kids? Her stomach flipped at the notion. She couldn't imagine even having one kid.

Pursing her lips, Frieda tilted her head. "Most people just say congratulations, you know."

A willowy figure passed through the door frame. The children parted like the Red Sea to make room for their grandmother to pass through. "Well," said Helen offhandedly, also bouncing a baby on her hip, "Lana is one of those university students. She forgets the rest of us also know how to do basic arithmetic, no degree required." Uh-oh. Lana straightened her back. She's mad. The urge to shuffle back into Mary Eunice, to guard her, rose in her chest, and she had to stifle it; her
mother would overreact if she saw any hint of affection between them. "At any rate, I would think congratulations were due six pregnancies ago."

"Mama," Frieda placated, long and drawn out. "We said you wouldn't do this. You said she could come."

Helen jerked her head up and held out the squirming baby to John. He placed the toddler back on his feet and took the smaller child from her. "Take the young'uns inside, John," she ordered; he muttered, "Yes, ma'am," and led a parade of children back into the house. Under the hot glower of the older woman, Lana wilted like a flower. I knew this was a bad idea. She should never have trusted her mother to keep the peace. Had she really driven over a thousand miles just to run back to her car and turn back now? Helen's sharp gaze flashed to Mary Eunice. "Who the hell are you? And what are you doing dressed up like the Grim Reaper?"

Mary Eunice stiffened, addressed for the first time since she had set foot out of the car. I'm sorry. Lana's hand itched to hold hers, to provide comfort. She couldn't. She didn't dare under all the watchful eyes. "Me? I—I—" Mary Eunice stammered. She gulped and licked her lips. "I'm Sister Mary Eunice—I belong to an order of Dominican nuns outside Boston."

A deep scowl etched itself upon Helen's face. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No!" Mary Eunice's eyes flew wide. "No—No, ma'am. I joined the abbey when I was seventeen. I was accepted into postulancy and later took the vows of a novitiate. I lived and worked in the Briarcliff sanitarium owned by the church for ten years. I took my solemn vows six years ago, vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. I was—all of the resident nuns at Briarcliff were reassigned, and I—I'm just staying with Lana until my Mother Superior finds a new residence for me."

A long appraising look passed from Helen to Mary Eunice, and Mary Eunice folded down at the middle like a card, afraid to make eye contact. "I didn't understand half of the words you just said. I'll take that to mean you're telling the truth. What did you say your name was again?"

"Sister Mary Eunice, ma'am."

"Right." Helen flicked her eyes back to Lana. "It's been fifteen years. Not a letter. Not a phone call. Of course, we didn't have a phone when you left, but you might've known that if you would've checked in with us once in awhile."

What? Lana lifted her gaze back up to her mother's. "I was under the impression no one around here wanted anything to do with me. Ever since I was chased out of the house while my father fired a shotgun at me."

"You could have asked our forgiveness. Wendy did. The Peysers were too ass-backward to step up and accept it, but she asked. You left with your head in the air thinking you had the moral high-ground." Lana's lips parted in a scoff, but before she could say anything, Helen pressed, "And then when everything happened—the Peysers get a phone call, but we get to watch a newsreel covering a string of murders in Boston and hear them say Wendy's name, hear you as the sole survivor—not a word." Her eyes glittered. "You broke your father's heart. All he wanted was to hear you say you were okay, but you couldn't be bothered, not a phone call, nothing."

"You didn't want me for fifteen years! Why would anything change now?"

"We wanted you!" She balled up her fists tight. Tears slipped from her eyes down her cheeks. "We wanted you the way we raised you! A proper girl! Not some—some university tramp with no morals and no sense of sexual morality! We wanted you with a husband! And children! The
way God intended it, intended you!"

Timothy stepped between them. "Mama, please, don't do this. You said you wouldn't read her the riot act."

"I changed my mind!"

Frieda sighed, pressing a hand to her temple. She mouthed an apology over their bickering. Lana set her jaw. She knew this would happen. She had to know this would happen. There's no way it wouldn't. Mama has never learned to give up a grudge. She wrung her hands in front of her, fighting to distribute warmth into them; her mother's wrath brought a chill over her whole body. As their squabbling quieted, she interrupted, "Are we allowed to stay or not?" Silence answered her. She lifted her eyes from the ground. "There's no point in lying to any of you. I haven't changed." I've changed so much—but not in the ways that matter to you. "I'm no different from when I left." I'm just missing the other half of my heart. "I'm not the kind of person you want at church, around the family." Her eyes flicked to Frieda. "Around your children." They would never trust her, never love her, and she didn't care. I just wish I would've known before I drove all this way. "So if that's going to be a problem for anyone, we can go home. I don't want to get thrown out in the middle of the night again. Once was stressful enough."

Helen set her jaw. "Fine. Get your things. You can stay in Timothy and Roger's old room." Her eyes flashed. "Bunk beds," she said with emphasis. "If I see you lay an improper hand on that woman, there will be hell to pay."

Bunk beds. Lana's heart sank. She hadn't slept without Mary Eunice in months. She should have predicted the stipulation. I'm lucky she didn't put us in separate rooms or make me sleep on the floor. "Fine." Timothy jogged off toward the car, patting her on the shoulder before he bolted.

Mary Eunice pressed, in her own sweet voice, "Mrs. Winters, I—I'm not afraid of Lana. She's never acted out of turn toward me." Lana bit back and swallowed her derisive snort. Never? Not even when we were kissing in my car, fifteen minutes ago? She averted her gaze to keep from betraying her dark inner thoughts. Mary Eunice didn't understand; everything was friendship to her. And I can't do anything to change that. Especially not while we're here. It would terrify her, and she has nowhere to go. She's trapped with me.

"You don't have to defend my daughter's character, Sister. It will speak for itself." She glanced down to Gus for the first time where he sat at Mary Eunice's side, skinny tail thumping and broad head resting against her thigh. "You can tether that monstrosity to the porch."

"He's an inside dog," Lana said. "He just got neutered. He could get an infection if he stays out here."

"There's no such thing as an inside dog. Animals are not welcome inside my house." Helen narrowed her eyes at Gus. He tensed, straightening like her gaze caused even him to improve his posture and avert his gaze. "Honestly, Lana, I know you hate men, but you didn't need to take it out on your dog. Castration is cruel. Now tether him."

She whirled around and stormed back inside; the screen door slammed closed behind her, leaving them standing outside with the crickets and the mosquitoes. Frieda cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, Lana. She said she wouldn't act like that."

"No—it's what I expected. It's not your fault." Lana turned her head and opened her hand for the dog leash, and Mary Eunice handed it over. "Will you get his water bowl?" We can't leave his food out here. It'll draw all types of varmint. Mary Eunice headed back to the car with a nod. Lana took Gus by the leash and drew out the long string of baling twine her father had always kept
under the porch; it was muddied but still strong. She tied it to his collar in a tight knot. "I'm sorry, buddy." He swathed his tongue across her face. "I know. We won't be here long." That man better die fast. For Gus's sake, if nothing else.

Timothy returned with a bag in either arm. "I'll run this inside for you, and then we can go to the hospital. It's time for Roger's shift to be over, anyway. He's been there since eight this morning." He hopped up the steps and into the house, and Frieda followed him inside.

Mary Eunice returned with the bowl and filled it from the hose spout on the side of the house. "He'll be alright," she whispered as she placed the bowl beside him. "He's been an outside dog before. Who knows what he went through before we got him?"

"Right." Lana scratched behind his ears. "I'm going to worry about him, though." He whined and licked from his sappy, dangling muzzle, straining for her touch to remain. "We'll be back soon, boy." She stood, and he sprawled out across the porch, more than comfortable with the arrangement. Mary Eunice placed a hand on the back of her shoulder, smoothed left and right in small, tight circles. Lana stole a glance back into the window of the house before she whispered, "Thank you."

Timothy emerged again, slamming the door shut in his wake, and they tore apart. He didn't notice or didn't care. "C'mon, ladies. Hospital has complimentary coffee and cookies for those of us stuck there during the holiday season." He winked and beckoned them, and after a moment of reluctant gazing at Mary Eunice, Lana followed him, leaving Gus behind on the front porch, heading toward Timothy's truck.
Small, pale, and gray on the white sheets of the hospital bed, Lana’s father stretched out in a pathetic jumble of wires and cords pressed into his paper thin skin, head tilted to the side as he slept. “He was last awake about ten or so this morning. Not long enough to eat. He hasn’t eaten in days,” Roger said. “I got him to drink something, and then he went back to sleep.” He smiled at Lana, but he didn’t greet her like the others; dark circles rested under his eyes, and when he introduced himself to Mary Eunice, he stumbled over his own name.

“We’re going to run home, Lana,” Timothy said. “We have an apartment now. We both have to work in the morning. I’ll come get you tomorrow morning before I head off to the department, alright?” They both bobbed their heads, mute at the sight of the dying man. “Call us or Mama if you need anything. John will be right here if you call for him. He’s a real nice guy.”

Silence consumed the room through the closed door. Outside, in the hallways of the hospital, nurses and doctors roamed, brightly lit hallways and beeping noises and crying babies, all manner of things one would associate with a hospital, but inside, gray shadows crawled from everything dimmed not to disturb the steady breaths of the tiny, thin man on the mattress. Mary Eunice glanced over her shoulder through the slit of glass in the door, and then she scooted closer to Lana, folding their hands together in the solitude. The squeeze of her hand sent a heavy breath whistling from Lana’s lungs. I don’t want to look at him. But she couldn’t rip her gaze away. She pushed back into the skinny futon and tugged Mary Eunice to sit beside her, their legs brushing. I can’t look at her, either. Her breath hitched whenever she saw the heavy, black-clad figure beside her, too parallel to the demon who had haunted her throughout the halls of Briarcliff.

Lana placed their joint hands in her lap and wrapped both of hers around Mary Eunice’s. Tears burned behind her eyes. She stared down at the white tile floor, cast gray from the lack of light in the room. Mary Eunice leaned close beside her; her presence, warm like a blanket, covered her and wreathed her in safety. She inhaled deeply in Lana’s hair. God, she’s so sweet. I don’t deserve her. Lifting a hand, she wiped her nose, where a steady drip had begun. “I’m sorry my mother yelled at you,” she whispered.

“She’s scarier than I imagined,” Mary Eunice admitted.

“Still not as scary as your aunt.” Lana arched an eyebrow at her in challenge.

Considering, she pursed her lips, and then she shrugged. “Fair enough.” Reclining her head, she rested it on the back of the futon, gazing up at the ceiling. “Your sister seems nice.” Lana hummed noncommittally in return. “She’s pretty.” Heat bubbled in the pit of her stomach at the soft words, and she had to fight to stifle them. Don’t be stupid. You can’t be jealous of Frieda. Even if Mary Eunice wanted to elope with her, she’s got eight kids—you don’t want any part of that. “Her husband isn’t very pretty, though.”

Lana snorted. “You’re right. She could do a lot better. Or—well, she could’ve done better eight kids ago. Now, she’d be lucky to find a nanny to tackle that many kids.” She rolled Mary Eunice’s hand between her own, fondling it with an absent mind, just glad to feel skin on her skin,
some comfort drawn there. I love her. I’m glad she’s here. She couldn’t imagine facing any of this alone. More than anything, she wanted to wrap Mary Eunice in her arms and hold her tight and whisper her thanks, but they were too close to the public eye. Anyone outside could storm in and tear them apart. “What was that you told her? About being a Dominican nun?”

“Oh—Dominican is just an order of nuns, Sisters, and friars. Dedicated to Saint Dominic. There are all kinds of orders. I just belong to one of them.” She knows so much. She has so much inside of her that I know nothing of, and I haven’t been listening. Lana straightened and nodded, encouraging her to continue. A frown quirked upon the pink lips, but after a moment’s hesitation, Mary Eunice continued, “Saint Dominic favored systematic education, so he created an order called the Order of Preachers, which emphasized a need for educated clergy members. That’s... really, that’s all I know. But there are a bunch of different orders. The Franciscans, the Carmelites, the Augustinians.”

“We don’t you ever talk more about it?”

“About my faith?” Lana nodded, flicking her eyes up to Mary Eunice’s and back down again. If she didn’t look at the face framed in black, she could focus on the voice and know its benevolence without stumbling backward. “Well—it’s not exactly interesting gossip.” Mary Eunice shuffled beside her, and the toes of her shoes drummed on the ground. “Nobody really cares, except those in the church, and they already know more about it than I do, so...” She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter much, anyway.”

“It matters to you, doesn’t it?”

She shook her head. “Not really. I would’ve joined whatever order Father William drove me to.” Her thumb slipped up to engage Lana’s, pads brushing against one another, and she tilted her head, resting beside Lana’s, almost close enough for their skulls to touch. “Not even regular people of the church know much. There’s a ton left for me to learn. I couldn’t possibly ever cover it all. I’m here to serve, not to know everything.”

To serve. Of course. Mary Eunice was a nun; she had sworn herself into a life of service, and soon enough, she would return to the service that had called her. She had said it herself, earlier, describing her vows—vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. She isn’t mine. She never can be. But her hands were soft, even if her embrace felt empty. “Where do you think you’ll go next? Where do you think they’ll place you?”

Mary Eunice averted her eyes. “I don’t know.” She nibbled on her lower lip. “I don’t know if they’ll reassign me at all, actually,” she admitted. “Father Joseph said he’s been trying to contact Mother Claudia for weeks, but he can’t locate her, or any of my Sisters. The cloistered abbey was dissolved and building repurposed after we were all placed in new homes of faith. The Monsignor hasn’t answered any of his phone calls.”

Lana quirked her brows. “But that’s madness. You can’t be the only one waiting for reassignment.” The whole abbey was dissolved? Lana had driven past the building a few times, large and intimidating, surrounded by tall stone walls. But she hadn’t heard the church bells chime from within the walls for years. “Has anyone else tried to contact the Monsignor? He can’t ignore everyone’s phone calls.”

“I’m sure he’s not ignoring them,” Mary Eunice defended. “He’s a busy man. He’s a candidate for cardinal, and he’s running Briarcliff independently as head with no help. He hardly has the time to sit around talking on the phone all day.”

“But he’s got to know there are people waiting on him to pick up the slack and point them in the right direction. He can’t dump you like some old dog on the side of the road and hope you wind
up in a good home."

“No, he put me in a good home.” Mary Eunice’s cheeks flushed with shame, and she averted her eyes. She withdrew her hand from Lana’s and picked at her arm through the long, dark sleeve of her habit. “He’s got priorities, and I’m—I’m not one of them.” Lana reached to pull the hand away from her arm and keep her from picking at the scabs; she flattened it to Mary Eunice’s thigh and pinned it there. “And even if he is avoiding me—I can’t blame him. Neither of us should still be serving.” Her hand balled up into a tight fist. “We both should’ve been defrocked months ago.”

Lana smoothed down the hand with her own. “No, you shouldn’t have. Neither of you had a choice. The Monsignor knows that. And if he’s more worried about climbing up the church ladder than taking care of those serving beneath him, he’s got the wrong priorities to be a cardinal, or anything else for that matter. Being a member of the church is empty if you don’t prove to care about and benefit the people around you.” She narrowed her eyes, brows drawing together on her forehead. “I learned that from you.” The tight muscles in Mary Eunice’s fist relaxed under her smooth massaging motions. Lana lifted her hand again, drawing it back against her body, eager to soak up all the physical goodness Mary Eunice allotted to her. “Has Father Joseph been able to locate Sister Jude?”

The inside of Mary Eunice’s cheek sank in where she bit down on it, and she shook her head. Her blue eyes glazed with tears before she shut them. Hoarse voice emerging in a croak, she mumbled, “He called everywhere—hoping he could find her and follow her back to Mother Claudia. But she’s not at the orphanage, or the school, or in any of the abbeys or the churches. He even called other orders. None of them have any record of her at all. It’s like she just disappeared.”

“She can’t have just disappeared. People don’t just vanish—” Lana reached to brush away a few of the shed tears with her thumbs. “The church is among the best record-keeping organizations in the world. Someone has to know where Jude is and when she went there. It’s just a matter of finding who knows.” *I want to kiss her. I want to comfort her.* Lana could do no more than squeeze her hand and hope her love leaked from one skin into another. “Why haven’t you told me this before?”

Dashing away the remaining tears with the back of her hand, Mary Eunice forced her trembling lips into a straight line. “I—I didn’t want you to think you’d be stuck with me forever,” she admitted. “I’m supposed to be out of your hair in March, and I—I will be, if I can find a place to go—”

Lana squeezed her hand. “Hey.” *No, No, I don’t want you to leave. I don’t even want to think about losing you. Especially not right now.* “You can stay with me as long as you like. You’re not in my hair. You’re my best friend.” *You’re so much more than that.* “I love you. Alright? You don’t have to worry about anything. I will always have a place for you. Always and forever. Do you understand? I’m not running out of room anytime soon.”

Mary Eunice bobbed her head, but a few more sniffles passed from her. “You can tell me anything,” Lana whispered. “I know you worry about these things. I want to listen when you’re troubled. Like you do for me.” *How many times have I interrupted her sleep in the middle of the night and cried in her arms? How has she buried these things inside herself under the illusion that I don’t care? She licked her thumb and wiped away the tears from her cheeks. In the bed, the sleeping man offered a long wheeze, but he didn’t stir. Lana took Mary Eunice’s hand and placed a soft kiss to the back of it, the most affection she dared to offer. “I love you.” *I’m in love with you, and the thought of you ever leaving hurts me more than I like to think.*

“I love you, too.” *Not the same way.* Mary Eunice opened her hand and curled the fingers into Lana’s. “I’m sorry.” Her eyes hung heavily. *God, she’s exhausted. And so am I.* Blinking a few
times, she withdrew. “Do you want me to go get you some coffee?”

“No, I’ll get it. I need to find the bathroom, anyway.” Lana squeezed her hand tight, and then she released it. “I’ll get you some cappuccino. You need a pick-me-up. We haven’t had a good night’s sleep in days.” She stood and smoothed down her wrinkly skirt, and she headed for the door to the hospital room, opening the door and stepping out into the hallway. Exhaustion ate at her bones. They had driven too far, endured too much, and yet they still beat on. My bed won’t have her in it, the next time we get to sleep. Her stomach sank. As a child, she had envied Roger and Timothy their bunk beds, but now, she loathed them; she loathed that anyone would try to come between her and her closest friend, her only friend. What did her mother fear? Finding them having sex? I’m not stupid enough to make that mistake twice. I’m never having sex in this state again.

Tugging at the sleeves of her sweater, she headed to the stairwell to follow the signs to the cafeteria. And she’s also a nun. Her cheeks flushed when she realized it occurred as an afterthought; for a moment, however brief, she had entertained the notion of sleeping with Mary Eunice—making love to her. In her mind, it played out. Their lips collided, and she grabbed the veil and coif in her hands, tugging them off and sweeping the comb out of those luxurious blonde locks. She fumbled with the top button of the habit, slipping it through the buttonhole, and the others followed, giving way to the thin white shirt and stained skirt Mary Eunice wore beneath her solemn garment. Pinkness flushed all over her chest, her neck, her cheeks. Wherever Lana planted her lips, blush soon reached, and she placed them everywhere, leaving no place on her neck untouched. She removed the shirt and tossed it aside, and the small breasts peeked out of the cups of the bra. Lana scraped her teeth across the flesh, unhooking the garment in back and discarding it like the rest of her clothing. Mary Eunice’s breath hitched; her chest jerked into Lana’s mouth. She wrapped her lips around one small rosebud nipple and sucked, flicking her tongue across its tip, until the body beneath her squirmed—

What the fuck! Lana slammed to a halt in the middle of the hallway and lifted a hand to her temple, pressing there, like she could banish the images from her mind through her touch. What had brought on those thoughts? She knew better! She had no right to think of Mary Eunice in that way. She trusts me. God, I’m such a fucking pervert. Uncomfortable moisture gathered between her thighs, a mixture of sweat and arousal collecting in her panties. Hot pressure spread through her nether regions. Her swollen clitoris pleaded for some relief, some touch, some stimulation, while her nipples hardened like stones and chafed against the cups of her bra. Where the hell am I? In her fantasy, she had lost track of the signs dappling the halls. Fuck.

Whirling around, she scanned left and right, but barring some equipment outside a closed room, the hallway held no signs of life. One display to the right of the room said, “Caution: X-ray exposure.” That would explain the barren atmosphere. “Please inform your doctor before receiving X-rays if you are or may be pregnant.” Good thing Frieda isn’t here.

“Miss?” The nurse’s soft voice summoned her, and she lifted her head at the calling. “You shouldn’t be back here, Miss.” Her brow quirked. “Did you come from another ward?”

Lana’s eyes stretched wide, and she approached. Each step irritated the flush between her legs. I’m too tired for this. “Uh—no. I’m looking for the cafeteria. I got a little turned around.” Distracted, more like it.

The nurse’s smile softened, anxiety leaving her expression, and she pointed back up the hall. “It’s that way. You’ll pass by the nurse’s station, and then it’s to the right. There’s no food served at this hour, but we have coffee, hot chocolate, and snacks available for all families of patients.”

“Right. Thanks.” Lana passed by her with a polite nod and followed her instruction. I can’t believe myself, thinking of her in that way. She’s my friend. I have no right. After everything she’s done for me, with me—she would be so hurt if she knew. Her heart sank. Why couldn’t she
control herself? Why couldn’t she keep those thoughts away? The trip had wearied her and broken down all of her fortifications, and now everything fell apart at the seams, strings flaking off like fraying puppets. I’ve indulged too much. Now I don’t know what to do. I need sleep.

She passed the nurse’s station to her right and headed down the hall toward the barren cafeteria, holding two weeping groups but no one else in sight. The pot of coffee was half-full, steam rising from the top of it, and beside it, microwavable packets of hot chocolate rested. No cappuccino. She’ll drink a hot chocolate. I’ll tell her it’s cappuccino. She probably won’t even know the difference. Lana poured one styrofoam cup full of coffee and nursed it as she stuck a cup of water into the microwave and waited for it to heat. I’m not ready for her to go. I don’t think I will be in March, either.

But, as much as she loathed the thought of losing Mary Eunice, the Monsignor’s silence also concerned her. When she had last spoken with him, he had had no qualms against threatening Mary Eunice’s position in the order, and his avoidance made her fear the worst. He had the power to reveal the gravity of everything Mary Eunice had done while possessed. He could have her removed from the order. Hell, he could have her arrested if he wanted to. Lana had no doubt there were things even Mary Eunice didn’t remember which he could hold against her if he chose. If he wanted to get rid of her, or punish her for what she had done, or silence her so she would not speak about the atrocities happening at Briarcliff, he had no shortage of ways to accomplish his goal. Mary Eunice’s faith is all she has left. He can’t take that away from her, too. Lana gulped at the thought, closing her eyes tight, leaning against the table and pinching the bridge of her nose. I would rather lose her ten times over than her lose her position. Mary Eunice valued nothing more than her faith, her practice, her service, her position—having forfeited everything, all wealth and opportunity, to serve God gave her great pride. I don’t understand it, but I know what it means to her. It wouldn’t be fair for him to take it away from her.

The microwave screeched an announcement, and she popped it open and poured the mix into the steaming water, stirring it in so the tiny marshmallows melted into nothing. After a moment’s hesitation, she took two packs of crackers; she doubted Mary Eunice would indulge in any potato chips, and she knew cookies were also out of the question. We haven’t had a good meal since we left home. They had feared stopping at a restaurant on their way here. Lana knew no one beyond Boston was likely to recognize her, but after what happened in October… She shivered at the prospect of endangering Mary Eunice again, especially for something as frivolous as a restaurant meal. She had to surrender some things in order to stay safe. If that meant buying out a whole gas station to keep her belly full on the road, she had no qualms against it.

Capping both cups with styrofoam lids, Lana passed by a platter of cigarettes, but the sight didn’t give her pause. Out of the quiet cafeteria, up the hall, back up the stairs, she retraced her steps, but she refused to let her mind do the same. She couldn’t allow her mind to wander into the dangerous territories of adoring Mary Eunice. It isn’t fair to hold her to those ideals. How had they gotten so intimate? How are we still treating it like friendship?

No one had given them rules. They both needed whatever it was their relationship provided. It had to be platonic; anything else was misplaced, against the rules of the church, in violation of everything Lana held for herself. She had no guidelines for navigating this weird new world without Wendy, and Mary Eunice had no guidelines for the world at all. She had joined the abbey expecting to be cloistered away from society. Anything helping them through it had to be good by default, right? Wrong. You’re in love with a nun. Stop trying to defend yourself. She doesn’t know the difference, but you know. You know you don’t treat her platonically.

Upstairs, in Lana’s absence, Mary Eunice stretched out her legs in front of her, popping her knees. Her stiff body resisted all movement, having spent far too long confined to the car. I want to sleep. Sleep gathered under her eyelids and tugged them down, and each time they shut, opening them
caused new pain to flush through her, took more energy. Her stomach burbled. She missed Lana’s kitchen, the full refrigerator, the selection of items she could cook for them to share. *We haven’t eaten anything but crackers and trail mix in days.* The regular meals at Lana’s house had weakened her resolve against hunger. At Briarcliff, she had learned to go long spells of time without food. But Lana indulged her, provided for her, cared for her. She had gained weight since emerging from Briarcliff; for the first time in her life, she had a slight pudgy to her stomach.

She knew her best life with Lana. *I never want to leave.* The future, the idea of leaving Lana for her service again, burned within her. How could she ever sleep in a bed alone again? How would she awaken from a nightmare and have no one to bury herself into? How would she cook meals for only one—or worse, for a whole number of people in a massive kitchen? She was in no rush to correspond with the Monsignor and receive her new placement. *Don’t be so silly, Mary. You’re a nun. You belong to God. You work in his service.* Of course, the church would reclaim her. She had chosen her path years ago, and she had never regretted it. *Nothing can come of me and Lana. We’re friends. And we’ll still be friends once I’m reassigned. I’ll ask to take leave and visit her, if it’s close enough, and she could always come see me—the new place couldn’t be as bad as Briarcliff—and I’ll write letters, and we can call, too.* It wouldn’t be the same. It wouldn’t be the same without the embraces, the snuggles, the kisses—all things she would forfeit upon reentering the order.

But she could not leave. Her faith was everything. Being a nun wasn’t her job; it was *her*, her very essence, her true self. If she wasn’t a nun, she didn’t know who she was. *God, give me guidance so I may best navigate the path back to You. Show me what I should do in good faith. Give me a sign. Make my path the best to Your glory.* She bowed her head as she mulled over her words. She had no reason to hurry, no reason to worry; God had never failed her in the past. She had no light. She followed the trail blindly, guided by an almighty hand, and she trusted it to lead her to the proper place. *I want to be where You want me to be. Give me a sign of what I should do, and I will do it.* Her mind wandered back to Lana—Lana, in all of her beauty, the softness of her dark eyes, the coil of her hair beneath Mary Eunice’s fingertips, the curl of her lips. *I’m in love with her. I’ve confessed it before, but my penitence has not changed my rogue heart. I know I must serve in good faith. Show me what I should do about Lana. Show me where I belong. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Had her place of belonging changed? Briarcliff no longer claimed her. The abbey which had sheltered and accepted her no longer stood. The Monsignor did not want her. Mother Claudia had vanished. *Is this a sign in itself? Is God trying to tell me I belong with Lana?* Mary Eunice licked her lips, eyes open now, puzzling through her thoughts while she glared down at the tile floor, like she disliked it for not holding the answers to her many questions. Would God do that? Ask her to leave her position to be with the woman she loved, knowing Lana could not love her back, knowing Lana’s heart belonged to Wendy? *No, that’s silly. God calls some people to forfeit the holiness of romance to His glory. He would not change his mind.* But maybe God was telling her she needed to stay with Lana for a little while longer; maybe Lana needed more of her. *We are both still healing. We probably will heal for the rest of our lives. Maybe we need each other to recover. Maybe that’s why God hasn’t reclaimed me yet.*

She pinched the bridge of her nose to try to relieve the pressure of weariness trapped inside her skull, but she found no reprieve there. The pain in her head would vanish only with sleep, and she couldn’t sleep. *Figuring out God’s will is hard.* She wished she could seek someone’s advice on the subject, her love for Lana, but no one would provide good, unbiased counsel. The priest she confessed to had never remarked upon her sin, and she had never requested his input for fear of his rebuke. She didn’t dare reveal it to Father Joseph; at best, he would want her to talk of nothing else, and at worst, he would seek to have her removed from Lana’s home. *I don’t want anyone to take me away from Lana.* Was she wrong for prioritizing her position with Lana over seeking counsel for her problems of faith and sin? *I don’t know!*
The man in the bed wheezed again, and she jerked up from her reverie to study him, his rugged face. Illness had eaten him down to the bone, made him frail as paper mache, but in the lines and shape of his face, some resemblance to Lana rested. She looks more like her mother. She looks a lot like Frieda. The three of them shared the same thick, dark hair and dark eyes. But she had her father’s nose, forehead, cheekbones, and stern lips. He gasped again, and his eyelashes flickered. “Mr. Winters?” she whispered, leaning forward. The monitor gave no indication of anything changing, and neither did he. His eyes didn’t move again, and his breath leveled out.

The door creaked open. Mary Eunice turned back to face Lana where she entered, a cup in either hand. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” Mary Eunice shifted back on the couch, pressing her back against the sofa. “I thought I saw him blink, but I think it was my imagination.” I’m so sleep-deprived, I’m seeing things now. Lana sank onto the stiff couch beside her and offered one cup, and Mary Eunice took it. “Thank you.” The contents warmed the cool palm of her hand. She lifted the lid to her lips and took a short sip, afraid of the hot liquid burning her. The distinct flavor of chocolate curled on her tongue, far sweeter than anything she allowed herself to taste. “This isn’t cappuccino.”

“They didn’t have any, and I knew you didn’t like coffee.” Mary Eunice stared down at the top of the cup. “It isn’t indulgent if you have no other choice. God doesn’t want you to be tired or thirsty. Drink it.” Lana bumped her with her elbow, and at the prompting, Mary Eunice took another sip. The liquid warmed her from the inside out, but the lacking caffeine meant it drove her eyes closed all the faster. Likewise, Lana rested her head on her shoulder, eyes drowsing in spite of the half-empty cup of coffee. The sweet scent of it tinged on her breath. Her greasy hair spilled on Mary Eunice’s shoulder, and she buried her nose in it, bumping up against her head. Lana’s eyes flicked open again. “I don’t know how I’m going to sleep without you.”

Mary Eunice blinked in surprise. “I’ll be right there with you,” she promised. “But… I was thinking the same thing. It’ll be weird, without you or Gus.”

“I’m thirty-four years old, and my mom is still bossing me around at my sleepovers, telling me I can’t sleep with the boys or bring my dog in the house.” Mary Eunice chuckled at the sharp words, resting her head against Lana’s. None of the nurses had come in to disturb them; she had no fear of them, right now. She needed the warmth of Lana’s body to keep from shivering, losing heat from sleep deprivation. “It makes me angry, that she thinks I would—I would take advantage of you. That she thinks that’s all we ever were.” Lana shifted to take another sip from her coffee cup. She cast her eyes down. “She thinks I’m not the same person I always was. I’m used to it, now, but it still hurts.”

“I know you would never hurt me, Lana.” Mary Eunice pursed her lower lip. “She’s prejudiced. But you’re here now. Maybe she’ll see that she’s wrong about you. Maybe she’ll come around and realize—realize all her preconceived notions of you, who you are, they’re all wrong. She’s wrong about you.”

“Maybe she isn’t.”

Mary Eunice quirked her brows. “What do you mean?” She has to be wrong, Lana, because she thinks you’re a sin, and I know you’re perfect. I know.

A heavy sigh flushed from Lana, and she sat up, withdrawing a little. “I mean… I mean we all know what it’s like when a man looks at us and wants something.” She darted her gaze up to Mary Eunice. Yes, I know. She nodded in agreement. “Sometimes he doesn’t just want something. And sometimes he doesn’t just look. But you always know, to some degree, what’s in his head, and it’s never anything good.” I know. Goosebumps ridged along Mary Eunice’s skin. She
swallowed hard, willing them away, willing her mind to go elsewhere. “And when I look at a woman, I—I look like that. I’m hungry.”

Frowning, Mary Eunice shook her head. “No, you don’t. You don’t look like a man looks. You don’t expect anything. It’s not—It’s not the same thing.” She nibbled her lower lip as she considered, and then she continued, “You never look at a woman and expect something. I—I know I’m not the embodiment of beauty, but—I’ve lived with you for months, and you’ve never made me feel unsafe. You’ve never made me feel like you could hurt me. You—You don’t have a man’s gaze. I know what those eyes feel like, and yours… Your eyes aren’t like that.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

Lana took another thoughtful sip from her cup of coffee, crossing her legs neatly beneath her skirt, and Mary Eunice followed the movement with her eyes, intent on the way Lana’s body shifted; like an artist studied a model for references, Mary Eunice sought to memorize every moving piece of Lana’s majestic form. “You’re wrong.” Lana lowered the coffee cup from her mouth, and her gaze moved from the opposite back to Mary Eunice. “About being beautiful. You are. I know you’re not allowed to believe me, because vanity is a sin, but you are.”

Oh, goodness. Mary Eunice’s cheeks flushed pink at the compliment, two warring sides emerging within her, one screaming, I’m not beautiful, and the other wailing, She thinks I’m cute! like Lana had bowed down and proposed to her on the spot. “You’re very kind to me, Lana,” she whispered, eyes averted. She allowed the heat of the hot chocolate on her tongue to distract her.

“I’m not just being nice, you know. I mean it.”

“I know.” Mary Eunice glanced down into Lana’s lap, one hand placed there, the other wrapped around the coffee cup. I want to hold her hand. “Thank you.” As if sensing her gaze, Lana moved her hand out of her lap and offered it, and Mary Eunice wrapped their fingers like tying bows on all of the Christmas gifts she had meticulously wrapped, cinching them together so they would never sever. “I think the same about you.”

Lana snorted. “Flattery will get you nowhere,” she said in a dry voice.

“I’m not—I mean it,” she insisted. You’re the most beautiful person I know. You’re the best part of my life. I know nothing when I don’t know you. “I think you’re beautiful.”

“You’re very sweet.” Lana uncurled her fingers from around Mary Eunice’s, and she gave a squeak of protest until Lana folded her arm around her shoulders. “You can sleep. Put your head in my lap. You drove for hours—you’ve got to be exhausted.” Mary Eunice’s grip tightened on the cup of hot chocolate, but Lana put both cups on the small end table beside her. “Here. It’s okay. Nobody will see.”

Mary Eunice caved into her will and her gentle touch, folding over to the side, and Lana uncrossed her legs so her thighs became a softer place for a head to rest. “What if he wakes up?” she asked, lip plucking between her teeth. She settled her cheek on Lana’s thigh, pressed her ear there, though she couldn’t hear any blood flow or heartbeat like when she had her head on Lana’s chest. It’s still good, though.

Hand combing over her veil, smoothing it down, Lana replied, “If he has a problem with this, we can leave. He wanted me here. He knows what that means. I don’t care.”

She peeked up through one blue eye to Lana’s face, distorted into a silly fold by the angle. Lana’s
voice trembled on the last words, a betrayal, and Mary Eunice pursed her lips. “Yes, you do.” Brown eyes darted down to her. “We wouldn’t have come all this way if you didn’t care. You wouldn’t do all this for someone you didn’t love.”

The wrinkles at the corners of Lana’s lips eased. “You’re right.” She brushed her hand over Mary Eunice’s shoulder and bicep, massaging her through the coarse fabric of the habit. “But I left for a reason, and I’m ready to leave again, if I need to. If they… If they want me to go, after they asked me to come here, I have no issues getting the hell out of dodge just like I did the first time.” A portion of Mary Eunice’s bangs fell forward out of her coif, but before she could scoop them back up herself, Lana swept them back under the white cloth. “I want to be here, but I’m not going to let them hurt either of us. They’re not worth it. I learned that a long time ago.”

Mary Eunice smiled from below, but tears rose in her eyes. I would do anything to have a place with my family. But she couldn’t dream of a world where her parents rejected her. She only imagined running to them, neither of them with distinct faces, and sweeping into their arms and asking if they were proud of her—of what little she had managed to make of herself. Lana didn’t have the fantasy which Mary Eunice had fed for years. Her parents had discarded her like garbage. “You don’t owe them anything.”

“I know.” Lana caressed her cheek, and Mary Eunice turned her head in reflex, seeking to kiss her fingertips. She tugged her hand away before Mary Eunice could accomplish her goal. “I can do anything while I have you.” Anything? Mary Eunice’s eyes fell closed. I feel the same. “Get some sleep, sunshine. I’ll wake you if anything changes.”

In spite of the awkward position creating a stitch in her side, nothing troubled her on her way to sleep. Light filtered onto her eyelids, and when she opened them again, her limbs stretched in a pale, nude sprawl on beach with yellow sand, the bright sun beaming down upon her, golden and warmer than winter allowed. Her hair spilled out behind her; she had abandoned the confines of her habit. Confines? She had never thought of her habit as a chain before, as a binding, something inhibiting her. She always considered her habit her protection, her safety, the means by which she attached herself to God and her faith. What had changed? Lana. Lana didn’t like to see her wear her habit. It served as a barrier between them.

Beside her, a long mop of brunette hair fanned out, and she rolled onto her side to examine Lana’s naked body, skin browning beneath the perfect sunlight. Freckles dappled her exposed chest, and her breasts rose and fell with even breaths, large areolas sparkling with droplets of seawater. The sound of the waves striking the beach echoed in the background. I’ve never been to the beach before. Mary Eunice grinned down at her. Fiendish play raised its head within her. She trailed the pad of her index finger down Lana’s collarbone, down her sternum, until her eyelids flickered. “Hey,” she whispered, lips curled upward at the corners; she couldn’t tear the smile from her own face. Her finger broke the path once it reached the bottom of her breast bone. It eased up around her left breast, circling beneath it, around the globe of soft fat in a lopsided circle. Lana flopped her head over, narrowing her eyes at Mary Eunice. Maybe I shouldn’t. She paused. “We’re on the beach,” she said.

Lana’s disapproving look didn’t fade. Mary Eunice removed her hand, tucking it back under her body, but Lana’s lip curled. “You…” Orange flashed in her precious brown eyes, the hue Mary Eunice cherished so. She gathered onto all fours and backpedaled through the sand. “You belong to me!” The voice wasn’t Lana’s, but deeper, masculine, familiar—something she had heard echoing within her own mind, words unclear but malevolent intent crystalline. “You belong to me! You are mine! Mine! Mine!” Lana scrambled after her, changing form as she hurled herself through the sand. Her limbs popped and snapped, dislocating, breaking, shattering; her spine bent over backward, exposing the thick brown mound of pubic hair. Lana’s body, the shell for something far more sinister, split open like an exoskeleton of some unholy insect. Snakes darted
Mary Eunice whirled around. The ground beneath her writhed with the impact of so many animals burrowing beneath it. Tremors waved over it. The ocean tugged back away from the shore, all of the water retreating. What does that mean? She stood on trembling, rubbery legs, ashamed of her nudity; she drew an arm over her breasts. The beating sun seared her skin. “Sister Mary Eunice!” She hiccuped in surprise at the sound of Sister Jude’s domineering voice. She shrank, but then her eyes fell on the figure of head nun—just as naked as Mary Eunice, as Lana’s fallen corpse, whole body weathered by age, pubic hair gnarled into the gray tangles like barbed wire, a cane cracking in her hand. “You are sick! Gynephilia! Disgusting! A homosexual!” She jabbed the sharp end of the cane at Mary Eunice, prodding her between the breasts. “You must be punished.”

“What does that mean?”

“Sister—” Mary Eunice’s voice squeezed tight in her throat. “Sister, please, it’s not like that—We’re just friends.” Yet she couldn’t tear her gaze away from Sister Jude’s bare body, the mysterious physique which she had only known buried under thick layers of chaste clothing. Sweat ran in rivulets between Sister Jude’s breasts, over her large, pink nipples. “Please!” Her feet rooted to the spot. Sister Jude seized a handful of her hair and snatched her by it, dragging her to the ground. “Ah!” Pain ripped through her scalp. She knelt, hands flying to her hair, but before she could mend the damage there, the cane cracked across her rear end, eliciting a yelp and sending her pitching onto her hands.

“Repent! Tell me what you are!”

“I can’t, I’m not—” The cane cracked against her again, breaking the skin with the strength of the lash. Mary Eunice sank her teeth into her lip. “Sister Jude, please—I didn’t mean, I didn’t want, I’m not—”

It landed again, each swing using more force. “Tell me the truth!”

“I’m a lesbian!” This earned her a series of lashes in quick succession, each collision with her flesh sending her further down into the sand, burying her face into the crook of her arm to muffle her shrieks. The sand clung to the teary streaks upon her cheeks and caught up in her mouth. Blood trickled down the broken skin on her thighs and dribbled into the sand, vanishing without a trace. “Please, Sister, please, I’m—so—sorry—” she sobbed, hiding her face in the crook of her elbow.

A gentle hand trailed up her spine, a placating embrace. She shivered at the stroke. “Look up, my daughter,” murmured Sister Jude. She stood over Mary Eunice; a calf brushed either of her sides, digging into the soft parts of her. “Look up!” she snarled. Again, she seized Mary Eunice by the hair and jerked her head back, upward.

Across the sand, Lana was hogtied and blindfolded, body smattered in leaking gashes, lip torn and trembling; she shivered from head to toe in spite of the beating sun, sweat rolling from her. Behind her, Dr. Thredson hovered, face stern and unforgiving as he crossed his arms, inclining his head. “No,” Mary Eunice whispered in a hoarse voice. “No, no, no—you can’t—” Her voice broke. “Don’t hurt her because of me—It’s my fault.” She closed her eyes tight. Sister Jude backhanded her. “You can’t hurt her because of me! Please! Please don’t hurt her!”

“Why don’t you want the good doctor to hurt her, my dear?” Sister Jude purred, poisoned honey right at the cup of her ear.

Mary Eunice began to bow her head, but Sister Jude snatched her back by the hair. “I love her!” she cried out in a broken gasp. “I love her! Please, please don’t hurt her—Take me instead, just let
“Her chest heaved and shuddered, unable to suck in a full breath. “I love her,” she repeated, soft, almost inaudible.

Dr. Thredson tugged a pistol from his back pocket and cocked it, the barrel inches away from Lana’s temple. Mary Eunice shrieked. She had no words, nothing but nonsensical babble, nothing to assuage him, nothing to make him turn the gun to her head instead. “You’ve corrupted her,” he said in a monotone. “We continued your treatment, Lana. I thought you had improved.” Lana shivered. In her hogtie, she bent her knees, like she tried to give some last layer of defense, tried to remedy her vulnerability by hiding just a shred of her naked body. “This is unconscionable—taking an innocent, one belonging to God, and doing this.” Mary Eunice’s scream died into a weak whimper. Don’t do it, don’t hurt her, oh God, help her! She shook her head. Why her? Why not me? Kill me! Please, kill me! “Do you have any last words?”

Lana’s busted lips buffered against one another. “Please don’t hurt Mary Eunice.” Lana, no, no, I don’t deserve it… Certainly, neither Sister Jude nor Dr. Thredson would heed her request, but Mary Eunice didn’t deserve the breath it took Lana to speak the words aloud. Her bare chest shuddered. She choked on her next words. “Sunshine?” Her nostrils flared, like she hoped she could smell Mary Eunice with the blindfold blocking her from view.

“Lana?” she whispered. “Lana, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—I didn’t mean for this to happen, I didn’t want you to get hurt—”

“This is the result of sin!” Sister Jude hissed, and she laid the cane across Mary Eunice’s lower back, licking fire; Mary Eunice cried out at the lashing. “You know better! I trained you better! You learned better!”

Lana gulped. “Don’t hurt her,” she rasped. “You’ve got me. That’s enough. Let her go. This isn’t her fault.” You’re wrong—it’s all my fault! I fell in love with you! I couldn’t keep it to myself! “You said it—I changed her. I did it. Let her go.”

“Satan has many tricks,” growled Sister Jude, “and all must be punished. The damage you have done cannot be repaired. I see how she looks at me. She has wandering eyes. Perverted eyes. A man’s gaze.”

Dr. Thredson lowered the weapon, pressed it right to the shallow dimple in Lana’s temple. Breath hitching, Mary Eunice couldn’t make out Lana’s tears, but she could hear the thickness in her weeping voice. “I love you, sunshine.” I love you! I love you! Forgive me! Mary Eunice crumpled up, inconsolable, dragged up by her hair and collapsing again, until the gun exploded, along with Lana’s head, vanishing in a red mist.

“No!” The ragged cry jarred her awake. She flipped out of Lana’s lap and landed hard on the tile floor, hands sprawled out before her, knees cracking on the white floor. Lana jerked up from the arm of the chair, head resting on one of her arms. “No—” This yelp died off as Mary Eunice scrambled back away from the edge of the hospital bed, disoriented. Where am I? She bumped against the couch, wrists and knees aching. Hands took her by the shoulders. She yelped and flinched.

Lana retreated. “Hey.” Her soft voice cut through Mary Eunice’s panic. “Sister? Are you okay?” I don’t know! Mary Eunice folded at the middle. Her breath kept catching in her throat and chest, refusing to nourish her or to leave when she had finished with it. I don’t know—I love you, and they’ll kill you for it, and I don’t want anyone to hurt you— She cringed as the gentle hands brushed her shoulders again, this time with more hesitance, more tenderness. “Get up, get off of the floor. Come here. It was a bad dream, sunshine, just a bad dream. Come here.” With her insistence, Mary Eunice fumbled back into the small sofa. Lana reached for her coif and veil and tugged them free, removing her comb and sweeping her long blonde hair out of her face. “You’re
all sweaty.” Pressing the back of her hand to Mary Eunice’s forehead and then to her damp cheek, her lips pursed. “You’re chilled. You feel cold.” Shivers pulsed through her whole body. “Can you tell me about your dream?”

*I wouldn’t know where to begin.* Mary Eunice’s brain caught electric blasts of the dream, what pieces she recalled, and those bits floated to her mouth first. “Sister Jude was naked,” she blurted.

Lana’s face froze. The lines deepened beside her mouth and beside her eyes, and her lips drew back in an attempt not to grin. “I agree, that’s nightmare material.” Her voice was tight, like she fought to keep from chuckling. “What was so scary about Jude? Did you realize you’re going to look like her one day?”

Ew. Mary Eunice shook her head. “N-No, she—she didn’t look bad.” Lana’s brow quirked. “I mean, she didn’t look *good,* she looked *old,* but for her *age* she looked fine—not that I have an opinion, but if I did, it would be—” She cut herself off and covered her face with her hands, trying to hide her blushing face from view. *Just talk yourself into a hole, why don’t you?* Shame burned all over her, in her arms, in her face, in the pit of her stomach. “I’m sorry.” She hiccuped around her tears.

Comforting arms folded around her middle. She tensed at them. Lana froze, and after a moment of consideration, she withdrew. *Don’t touch me! They’ll hurt you if I love you!* The image of the cold steel barrel of the gun pressed to Lana’s temple refused to leave her mind, planted like the seeds of a weed in a flower garden. “What was it really about?”

Mary Eunice hiccuped. “Sister Jude—she—” She bit down on her tongue at the first thought of Dr. Thredson. *No.* She didn’t want Lana to know she had dreamed of him. She didn’t want to bring up a reminder now, here, so far away from home, when things were already so gnarled with emotion and sleep-deprivation. “She killed you—It was my fault, because of me, she was killing you, and I—I couldn’t *do* anything—”

“Hey.” One of Lana’s cool hands covered hers and tugged it away from her face. “Hey.” She narrowed her eyes, not in criticism, but in analysis, seeking understanding. “No one’s going to hurt me.” She rubbed the back of her hand with her thumb. “Why on earth would something like that be your fault?”

Her stomach flipped. *Because I’m a lesbian.* She had said it in her dream. But her teeth latched down on the tip of her tongue and refused to let it draw from between them and bring forth the confession. She *couldn’t* be a lesbian; she wasn’t allowed. She was a nun—she had pledged her life to God and his service, and God had blessed her by placing her with Lana, by giving her this wonderful friend, and making the statement, revealing herself to Lana, would only betray Him for His kindness, for what He had demonstrated to her. *It isn’t a sin.* Oh, no, being gay—that wasn’t a sin, not to her; she had gotten over her qualms about Lana’s sexuality long ago. But the feelings were sinful. She had taken an oath against romance, and the oath included both men and women; if she strayed from it, she violated her vow of chastity. Mary Eunice hiccuped, but she found no words to explain herself to Lana. “Sister?” Lana prompted, and her title elicited a fresh shudder rolling down her spine.

“I—I don’t know. I don’t know why I would think that.” The pimples of gooseflesh all over her arms and legs made her fold over at the middle, and Lana swallowed her into another embrace. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.” Her quivering muscles seized at the hug, but Lana didn’t relinquish her this time, instead squeezing her tighter and smoothing a hand up and down her back. *Dear Lord, forgive me for what I have done.* Her lower lip wriggled in the air. *I know I cannot have Lana. Help guide my heart back to its righteous path, and protect Lana. I don’t want to hurt her through my own folly.* “Thank you.”
Lana kissed her temple. “You don’t have to thank me.” She tucked a lock of blonde hair behind Mary Eunice’s ear and took the coif and veil, carefully fitting them over her hair and straightening them so they didn’t tug or chafe. “You’re so cold. I’ll go grab us some more coffee, alright? And I’ll see if a nurse will lend us a blanket for burning the midnight oil here.” Mary Eunice bobbed her head, unable to conjure an intelligent response. Her brain had twists in all the synapses connecting her thoughts to her tongue, so instead, she remained in dumb silence. Lana squeezed her hands. “Are you sure you’re okay? Do you want me to stay?”

_I want you to stay forever._ Mary Eunice averted her eyes and shook her head. “I’m fine,” she whispered. “I’ll be alright,” she said instead. “Go on.”

A wrinkle formed between Lana’s eyes at the whispered words, a purse of concern on her lips ( _I just want to kiss it away, I just want to kiss her until I forget how wrong I feel, I want to kiss her and it is so wrong_ ), but she didn’t argue against Mary Eunice’s words or her sudden detachment. “Alright. Just hold tight. I’ll be right back.” Lana shuffled out of the dark room into the well-lit hallway, leaving Mary Eunice in solitude with the steady breaths of the unfamiliar dying man beside her.

Mary Eunice tugged a few tissues from beside the bed and blew her nose, wiping her eyes, and once she had cleansed her face, she threw out their old cups of tepid drinks and glanced at her reflection in the tiny wall-hanging mirror, all puffy cheeks and red eyes and brilliant nose. Aunt Celest hated crying. She called it the urine of the face. She wiped her face again, but the swollen bits didn’t shrink, and she retreated back to her seat no prettier than when she’d risen. _No need for beauty. Pride and vanity are sins._ She had to figure out what to do. _I can’t keep allowing it to build. I must seek counsel._ But still, she faced the dilemma: who? Who would hear out her problems and regard her without bias? Without prejudice? Where, within the church, could she find someone who would listen, understand, and advise without judgment on the object of her unrequited romantic affection? _Nowhere._ The church would never accept her any more than it accepted Lana—while holding its nose, allowing her passage but parting like the Red Sea so not to draw too close and risk catching her “disease”, risk befriending her, risk understanding her, risk becoming like her. _I became like her. But I didn’t become. I was this way all along. I just needed someone to show me._

Part of her, a greedy part which loathed this change, wished she had never figured it out; part of her longed for those simpler times before when she looked into Lana’s eyes and saw only a friend, when she pursed her lips in confusion at Lana’s lesbianism, when the prospect of any relationship was so alien she could hardly consider the notion. _But I love Lana too much to want anything but loving her. Even if loving her is one-sided._ She relished in Lana’s sweet kisses, in her tender words, in the soft texture to her touch. Every time she held hands with Lana, it gratified something within her, sated her, relieved her. She could never wish to lose that sweetness. _So what do I do?_ 

Mary Eunice lifted her head to the ceiling, hoping to spy some divine guidance up there. The gray, water-stained ceiling tiles loomed above her, unyielding and unchanging. _Lord, You know I cannot find honest counsel within the church. Please, guide me. Pick for me the path You intend and allow me to follow it clearly. Give me signs to what I should do. Clear signs. Big ones. You know I’m kind of dumb and oblivious. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit._ She made the Sign of the Cross and blew a soft sigh from between her lips. Her rosary weighed in her pocket, but she feared if she attempted to pray it, she would nod off. This night had brought enough disrespect to God without her falling asleep in the middle of prayer.

“Ugh…” She upstarted at the long groan from the man in the bed. He blinked, eyes narrow, blotting out the gray light of the room, and then he turned his head, chapped lips buffering against one another, not quite forming words as he squinted to make her out in the darkness.
Oh no. Oh, yes, this is great! Oh—where did Lana go? Mary Eunice’s heart refused to still in her chest, fast enough now for her see its pulses in her eyes. “Mr. Winters?” she whispered; she cleared her throat, unable to find her voice. “Are you awake?”

He uttered a low sigh through his parted lips. He had no teeth. “Who the hell are you?”

Mary Eunice’s heart refused to still in her chest, fast enough now for her see its pulses in her eyes. “Mr. Winters?” she whispered; she cleared her throat, unable to find her voice. “Are you awake?”

She choked. Me? Who am I? He doesn’t know me. That’s right. “Me?” she said, blinking like she had to remember her own name. “I—Me—I’m—My name is Sister Mary Eunice.” She adjusted her veil, smoothing it down and flicking a piece of lint off of its rough fabric. “I’m a friend of your daughter.”

Landon scowled at her. “Bullshit. Frieda doesn’t know any nuns. John’s a good Baptist boy. We wouldn’t let her hook up with a Jew.”

Mary Eunice hesitated. Catholic, actually, nuns are Catholic. She decided better than correcting him. “No, I—I’m here with Lana. Lana brought me here with her, from Boston.” She braced herself. What if Frieda was wrong? What if he doesn’t want to see her? Should I warn her before she comes back in?

His lips curled downward. “What?” Oh no. Mary Eunice’s hands tightened on the sides of the chair, clenching until the knuckles whitened. But then his chapped, dry lips began to shiver, and tears budded in his glossy eyes, the same color as Lana’s. “Lana’s here?” His voice roughened with tears clogging his throat. “She came home? She came back to see me?” He choked on his words. “They didn’t—They didn’t tell me she was coming—” He put a hand over his mouth, muffling, fighting to hide his tears from her, while his wrinkled skin darkened and flushed.

“The roads were all icy up north. They were afraid we wouldn’t be able to make it, with the weather.” Mary Eunice tugged out another tissue and gave it to him, and in his shaking hands, he blew his nose like she had done just moments ago.

“Where—Where is she?”

“She just stepped out to get some more coffee. She’ll be right back.” His whole face crumpled, and he bawled, trying to shrink into the bed. This is humiliating. Mary Eunice scooted back, away from him, hoping to grant him some privacy—like death was a private matter at all. “Mr. Winters?” she questioned. “Do you want me to get you something?”

He shook his head. “No…” His body eased into the blankets. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to do all this, I just—I never expected her to come back… After Wendy, and everything, and—” He cut himself off, and then his eyes darted back up to her. “Are you… you and her…?”

Mary Eunice’s eyes fluttered wide; for a moment, she didn’t know how to answer, caught somewhere in the land of I wish but knowing the inherent untruth of it. “No!” Her vehemence choked her. She swallowed it. “No, no, sir. I took a vow of chastity upon entering the abbey. I’m celibate.”

“Abbey,” he repeated, slow and long. “Right.” His eyes narrowed; she couldn’t read his face for sleepiness or suspicion. “Lana—” His rough voice cracked when he said her name. “She’s been through enough. If you’ve got some plan of—of changing her, cut that shit out, right now. She only deserves to be loved now.”

Oh, dear. Mary Eunice edged away from him, his demeanor still threatening in spite of his position, sprawled out weak in the bed. “Sir, no—no, I can’t change Lana—I don’t want to. She’s my closest friend. I love her very much, just the way she is, and I could love her no more if she was different.”
His skeptical gaze regarded her for a bit longer, like he couldn’t decide if he believed her word on it, but then he nodded, slow and considerate. “You were what she deserved all along.” He averted his eyes, glowering down at the cover on the bed; like sizing up an enemy in battle, he studied the cotton beads forming on the itchy cloth. “The rest of us were too goddamn blind to see it. To see her. Until it was too late.” He grimaced. A tightness flexed around the corners of his eyes. He’s in pain.

Mary Eunice looked to his empty IV bag. That’s why he’s awake. His painkillers wore off. “Don’t look at that,” he reprimanded, and her eyes fled the IV bag. “I asked them—I asked them not to give me morphine. I don’t want it anymore. I’ve been numb my whole life.” He tugged up the blankets, disguising the tubes coming out of his arm. “I don’t suppose you’ve got any fancy powers… Last rites, or whatever bullshit you people like to perform.”

Mary Eunice winced at the expletive. His gravelly voice made everything sound more harsh. “No, I—I’m just a nun. Only priests are allowed to perform last rites or give blessings. I could give you communion, but I haven’t any hosts.” Giving communion to a non-Catholic would violate so many canon laws, she warned herself, but the man waved her off before she could finish the thought. “I can pray with you, if you like,” she offered in a small, meek voice. The church had not granted her the ability to help a dying person with rites or blessings. Perhaps it would’ve been better to lie and make him feel better and confess to the sin of dishonesty later. Mary Eunice nibbled on her lower lip.

He shook his head. “Nah. Sweet of you to offer, though, darling.” He lifted a hand to his face to muffle his yawn. Each time he moved, he grimaced, and Mary Eunice averted her eyes to keep from observing his pain. Her helpless hands wrung in front of her with uncertainty. “Thank you for coming along with Lana. It’s a long drive. Not something I’d wanna make alone. She… She needs somebody to take care of her. Deserves a good friend to look after her, after everything. I wish I would’ve been there. I wish I hadn’t been so damn stupid.” Mary Eunice’s face softened. I can’t hate him. She had expected to loathe him, to regard him with fury that he had ever tossed Lana aside like old garbage, but contrite tears slipped from his eyes down his cheeks. “Do you think she’ll ever forgive me?”

I don’t know. Mary Eunice sucked on her lower lip. She didn’t want to lie, but she couldn’t bear to hurt him, either. He already had the guilt of having chased away the most wonderful person Mary Eunice had ever known; he didn’t deserve any additional weight, any supposition of his odds of receiving Lana’s forgiveness. Would I forgive him? Mary Eunice had learned from an early age to forgive all sins, all transgressions against her, without batting an eye. But no one had ever harmed her the way this man had harmed Lana. I would. She knew herself well enough to know she had no spine. Lana had a spine. Lana had survived through her sheer nerve—it had defended her, protected her, served her when everything else turned its back on her. Lana knew how to sever ties and turn away in the blink of an eye because other people had done it to her more times than she could count.

But we came all this way. Lana hadn’t severed ties. She hadn’t turned away. She had answered
the phone, and she had packed her suitcase, and she had gotten in her car, and she had driven all
the way here, all the way back into this unknown territory, to this battleground which had already
demonstrated its enmity once, to see this man, who requested her forgiveness. “I think she already
has,” Mary Eunice whispered. “Even if she doesn’t realize it yet.” She wouldn’t do any of this for
someone she didn’t love.

His gaze softened. The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and lips relaxed. Something in his
expression was once noble, if now faded, and in the creases of his face rested the man who had
raised her best friend. In her mind’s eye, the face of her father shifted, matching Landon; the
product had merged so many faces in her lifetime, she doubted it matched her father at all. “Thank
you.” He lifted a hand with the gray, paper thin skin, and she cradled it in her own. “You’ve got
some clammy hands, girl.”

She began to snort her way through a chuckle, but the door cracked open, and Lana slipped
through, a blanket folded over her arm and a cup of coffee in either hand. “Yours is the one with
the creamer. It’s a little cold—I guess they stop brewing at a certain…” Her words vanished from
her tongue at the sight of the two of them, Mary Eunice balancing the dying man’s hand in her
palm like a wounded bird, afraid to touch too firmly and cause more pain. “Daddy?” Lana’s bare
voice stripped her all of pretense.

“Hey there, cricket.”

Mary Eunice stood hastily, the wrinkles in her habit cascading around her in a disheveled way,
and she took the cup of coffee and the blanket away from Lana. She draped the blanket on the
back of chair. I should give them some privacy. As much as she loved Lana, it wasn’t her place to
linger and listen in on this conversation. Lana shadowed her, mere inches between them, shuffling
close beside her. What is she doing?

“What is she doing? “I’ve got to go to the restroom.”

Lana grabbed her by the wrist. “No.” Mary Eunice’s eyes widened. What? “Stay. Please. I want
you to stay.” Her tangled hair hung in greasy strings from the days of going unwashed in their
travel; circles darkened the space below each eye. In her deep brown eyes, a certain desperation
rested, exhausted and lonely. She’s afraid. “Please,” she repeated, squeezing Mary Eunice’s wrist
with all her might.

“I really do need to find the bathroom. Mary Eunice scanned Lana once. “It’s okay,” she said. He
doesn’t know who I am. He deserves to say what he wants to say in private. She wouldn’t want to
deliver any message to someone she loved dearly with a stranger looming just a few feet away.
Lana didn’t relinquish her grip on Mary Eunice’s arm. “I’ll be right back.” Should I stay? If that’s
what she wants? “You’ll be fine.” She couldn’t stay.

The dark eyes fell away from hers, downward, and she shifted closer. A soft tickling sensation
rose from her abdomen; she glanced down to where Lana’s hand sank into the pocket of her habit,
near enough for Mary Eunice to smell her breath and the faint scent of perfume still attached to her
hair. Lana withdrew her hand with the rosary tucked between her fingers. She looked back up to
Mary Eunice with a question in her eyes, as if to affirm that she had permission to take the
 treasured string of beads. Lifting a hand to her lips, Mary Eunice kissed her fingertips and pressed
them to Lana’s mouth. It’s okay. She didn’t know why the rosary brought comfort to Lana, but
she didn’t need to know. Lana could have whatever she needed to make herself feel safe.

Warm lips pressed to her cheek, the scent of coffee attached to her breath. Mary Eunice resisted
the urge to chase Lana’s mouth with her own, starved of the kisses they had shared so often in the
recent months. Lana slipped the rosary into the pocket of her own skirt, but she didn’t remove her
hand from it, keeping it in her firm grasp. “Thank you.”

Mary Eunice retreated, leaving Lana alone in the shadows of the gray room, heart in her throat
alongside her coffee, which wanted to make a reappearance. She gulped down the bitter flavor. Perhaps it was childish, wanting to use Mary Eunice as a human shield, but her fear refused to settle in the pit of her stomach; it reared alive inside of her, driving her. Why did I come here?

He waited in silence. She didn’t remember his silence; her memory echoed with him shouting, lashing out, or stumbling through a delirium, never quite present enough to go quiet. Age had weathered him. They had both changed. I haven’t changed enough to please any of them. I never will. Slinking beside the bed, she sat on the edge of the futon, fixing her eyes on his grizzled eyebrows. “Hi, Daddy.” The childish title, native to her birthplace but foreign to Boston, the place she now considered home, curled upon her tongue with a certain discomfort.

“Hey, baby.” He grinned. She held her face steady, unable to return his glee, unable to look at him, and the simper faded into a firm, straight line. “You like that girl, huh?”

Electricity flared through her whole body like he had jabbed her with a cattle prod, eyes widening, jaw setting, fists balling; one part of her squared up to fight while the other part jerked toward the door, wanting to fly, and blood flushed through her, enabling her for some escape. His hands flew up in self-defense. “Hey—Hey, now, I don’t mean nothing by it!”

“What the hell do you want?” Louder than she intended, Lana perched on the edge of the futon, ready to fly out of the room, hating herself for lingering even a moment longer. “I didn’t come all the way here for you to tell me what a disappointment I am.”

“No, baby, that’s not—”

“Don’t call me that.” Like ice cubes dropped down the back of her shirt, the pet name sent chills all over her body, memories of a frigid basement she loathed to revisit. Her heart seized into another panicked lashing. Don’t do this now. She fought to unclench her fists. Shivers trickled down her arms and ended in her fingertips. Relax. Think of Mary Eunice. Flattening her palms to her thighs, she sucked in a deep breath through her nose. “I don’t like to be called that anymore.”

“Alright, alright,” he placated. The silence hung heavy with tension between them before he asked, quieter, “Can I still call you cricket?” She nodded, silent and numb, tongue pinched between her teeth hard enough to sting. He scanned her once. “I just asked if you liked the girl. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

The last time you found out I liked a girl, you tried to kill me. “I do. Like her.” Lana had learned lying to her father never worked out as a child, and prying untruths from her lips now would come as easily as her teeth from her gums. “Is that a problem?”

He shook his head, but he stroked his rough, fuzzy chin with one hand. It looks like it’s a problem. Lana resisted the urge to challenge him. “She lied to me,” he said. She narrowed her eyes. Mary Eunice wouldn’t lie to anyone. “She said you weren’t a—a thing.”

“We’re not. She doesn’t know.” Lana rested her hands on her knees, uncertain how to continue. Had he called her here just to analyze her company of choice? Just to inconvenience her over the holiday before he died?

He frowned. “I just thought…” His chapped lips buffered over one another as he considered, drifting off mid-sentence, like he had all the time in the world, like he had no great rush. “Well, I just thought, the way she looked, when she talked about you—she looked the way Wendy used to look at you. I thought I might be onto something.” Of course. He wants to talk about Wendy. Lana averted her eyes. “You know, when you were both kids, I always thought you looked at each other funny. Not like any of your other friends.” One long, weathered finger trailed over the rough texture of the hospital blanket. “I guess some part of me always knew. Not consciously, but… I
The other dads would tell me I spent too much time with you, throwing the baseball, or reading, helping you with the science fair—they told me you were gonna grow up and wanna wear pants everywhere.” He cast a sideways glance at her skirt. “Metaphorically, I reckon. But then I reckon your Mama would’ve shot you if you’d turned up in jeans, too.”

“I’m a journalist, Daddy. I have to dress respectfully. No one would give me an interview if I didn’t.” That bit me square in the ass, looking for interviews. Lana swallowed the hard, dry lump in her throat at the thought, shoving it away.

“I know, cricket, I know. I just meant—well, I meant I shouldn’t have been shocked, and I still was, and that makes it worse, what I did. What I did to both of you. I tore two families apart, chasing you away, and… That’s not how a parent should act.” He looked up at her, like he expected her to answer him, to comfort him. Lana knew nothing to offer to him in return, so she maintained her silence. He cleared his throat and resumed picking at the little beads of wool on the rough blanket.

“When God gives you a baby, that’s a blessing. From the very moment you know. I was so proud when your mother told me she was pregnant. I remember—she was crying, because we didn’t have a damn thing to eat already, and she didn’t want to tell me because she thought I was gonna be mad.” He shook his head, chuckling. “She couldn’t wipe the shit-eating grin off of my face. She kept telling me to stop laughing and act like a man. What were we going to eat? Where were we going to put a baby? She always was a sourpuss, your mother. Had no trouble looking a gift horse in the mouth and saying exactly which teeth were missing. But I wasn’t. I was going to love my baby first. The circumstances—the situation—well, that sure as hell wasn’t your fault. You were my first priority, because you were my baby and my responsibility, and you deserved the best of what I could give you.” Discomfort prickled through Lana. Was it a lie if she didn’t tell him about the child she had conceived and disposed of?

Fuck, no. This isn’t confession, and he isn’t a priest. He could go to his grave none the wiser about what had happened to her. No one needed to know. They wouldn’t understand. I have to keep the peace while I’m here.

“I don’t know why I ever let that change. Why I lost sight of how much I loved you. Or how it was even possible. I’m your father. Loving you—that’s my first job. And I let you down.”

Again, he fixed his gaze upon her. “I don’t know what you expect me to say.” Her honesty smarted on the tip of her tongue. She couldn’t offer him words of comfort; she had endured things far too cold to coddle him now. “You’re right. You threw us away. We became something great, both of us. But we did it alone. We had to want each other, because no one else wanted us. You have no idea what it did to us—being nineteen and writing our wills just so we knew, we knew if something happened to one of us, no one could come out of the woodwork and try to rob the other one. I would say thank God for that, but it turns out none of her family cared enough to want a dime or a toothpick anyway.” Her eyes stung with vicious tears. She curled her lip to restrain them, tongue pressing into the roof of her mouth.

His whole face softened, wet streaks on his wrinkled cheeks. “Lana, I am so sorry for how we hurt you. It was so wrong—”

“I’m not mad for me!” He closed his mouth with a click. “I don’t matter. I got over it. I’m mad for Wendy.” I’m mad for her because she can’t be mad for herself. “What you did to her—it tore her apart! She never got over it. Do you know how much she would’ve loved to come back here? To see Frieda’s kids? To see her own brothers and sisters and their kids? Once she told me she would cut off her own hand to get to hug her mother again.” A sob choked in Lana’s throat. She strangled it right at the surface. She wouldn’t release it; she wouldn’t weep in front of him. He didn’t deserve it. “Wendy wanted nothing more than to be with her family. She knew we couldn’t have children, but she thought having her family would make up for that. You took that away from her. You robbed her of everything she thought she could have.” Her students were all she
had left. Her class was the last remnant of her childhood dream, and Jude made her choose between it and me, and she could never have made that choice. “I was fine without you—without all of you. Wendy was enough for me, just her. But she wanted more. She loved me, but we never made it through a Christmas season without her crying over her pictures of her family.”

Lana’s nose dribbled into a steady drip, and she ripped a tissue from the box beside the bed, ashamed of her inability to control her sinuses. Bitterness licked all over her tongue. No matter how she swallowed, the flavor refused to disappear. The inside of her mouth had turned syrupy and dry. The flicking, light pulse in her neck fluttered like the wings of a hummingbird. Breath made the inside of her nose raw and stinging. Sweat dampened her palms. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted her cup of coffee, but the thought of drinking from it now sickened her gut; she needed no help becoming jittery. “I can’t blame anyone for the way Wendy died.” No one but myself. “A very bad person decided he wanted her—both of us—and nothing anyone could have done would have stopped him. But goddammit if I don’t blame you for the way she lived. Frightened, and sad, and ashamed… She loved me. But she had a hell of a time learning to love herself, feeling like she was worth being loved. And that—that fucking sucks. Because she was an amazing person, and it kills me every day that she didn’t get to do half the things she wanted to do, with me or otherwise.”

She smeared away her tears before they could linger on her cheeks, thanking herself for abstaining from the makeup. Self-loathing stirred in the pit of her stomach, but longing mingled with it, straining for some intimacy—for Wendy or for Mary Eunice, for someone to allow her to bury herself into their arms and cry fresh tears for a tragedy she would never stop reliving. Her shoulders quaked. He cleared his throat, quiet, soft. “I… I’m sorry, Lana. You’re right. What I did was wrong.” Neither of them looked right at each other. “I can’t answer for the Peysers. They must repent for their own sins. But I should have loved her, welcomed her, as much as I did John, as much as I wanted to for the boys—like they’re ever gonna get off their asses and find a girl.”

He made a sad, derisive snort. Lana didn’t laugh. “I made a horrible, horrible mistake, and I hurt both of you, and I am so, so sorry. I don’t expect you to forgive me. I hope you will, one day, because you don’t deserve to have that anger weighing on your soul, but if you can’t… I don’t blame you. I won’t ever forgive myself. And I won’t ever stop blaming myself for what happened to her.”

Lana shook her head, setting her jaw firmly. “That’s not your fault, Daddy. A whole slew of other shit is, but that—that isn’t.”

The door creaked open, but Mary Eunice reentered in total silence; even her footfalls made not a sound upon the tile floor, and she sank onto the futon beside Lana with her legs pinched together neat and proper, coffee cup clutched in her hand and smudges of exhaustion under her eyes. Out of the corner of her eye, she stole a glance at Lana, and her free hand landed in the narrow neutral space between them—an offering which Lana understood and accepted, wrapping her own hand around it, fingers folding together.

Again, he snickered, wry and rueful, hiding his face from her with one hand. “I do have one question for you,” he asked, muffled into his palm. Lana hummed a vague agreement. If he asks how we have sex, I’m going to die right here and now. Her face burned at the prospect. She couldn’t imagine narrating a lesbian sexual encounter to her father with her best friend, a nun, beside her. “Is—Is your whole woman deal, whatever you call it…” We call it lesbianism. “Is that our fault? I mean, is there something we did, or didn’t do, that made you… I know you always wanted your hair cut short, and I made your mama let you keep it. Should I not have done that? Or when I bought you a baseball, or carved up that bat for you, or let you wear pants—Is that why you are this way?”

Lana’s eyes misted a little more. Why am I this way? Her gaze wandered down to where her hand
tangled with Mary Eunice’s. What had made her crave a woman’s touch so much? “No, Daddy, that’s not it.” Too many games of baseball couldn’t have done this to her. Her need for a bob was a symptom of her sexuality, not the root. Why did her fingers fit with Mary Eunice’s so neatly? Why was her soft skin such a comfort? Why did she nestle close to this warm body every night and feel the subtle curves through their nightclothes and cherish the feminine touch of a woman whose vulva she would never taste? Why did the flowery shape of a vulva, the garden of pubic hair, arouse her so? “I don’t know why.” She had no answers for him. “I just am. It’s no one’s fault. It is the way it is. The way it always has been.”

To her surprise, Mary Eunice nudged her shoulder, words in her eyes—asking permission to speak. Lana nodded an invitation. She hesitated before she said, “God told Jeremiah He knew us before conception. ‘Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou came forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.’ God doesn’t make mistakes. He makes us just the way He wants us to be.” She squeezed Lana’s hand once, tight, and eased only when Lana squeezed back with equal fervor.

He hummed. “You’re wise beyond your years, Sister. I bet your daddy is proud of you.”

“I hope so, sir.”

Lana rubbed the side of Mary Eunice’s thumb, the only consolation she could offer. Mary Eunice would never know what her father thought of her. She could speculate and dream and think of a future in heaven with the family she hadn’t known. *I’m glad I came.* She knew Mary Eunice wouldn’t have held it against her if she had decided not to go. *But I couldn’t have forgiven myself for throwing away what she’s always wanted. Even if he doesn’t deserve it.* “I’m proud of you, cricket.” His words were slowing, softening. “Do you remember, when you were a little girl, and Glenn Miller was our favorite band leader?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“We won the father-daughter swing dancing competition in your age group at school one year—you were ten, I think. Frieda was so jealous. I couldn’t help that you were a better dancer than her.” Lana inclined her eyebrows, though this time, she couldn’t restrain the derisive chuckle which rose from her. “And then Mr. Miller went MIA.”

Lana nibbled on the inside of her lower lip. The ink of the newspaper stained her fingers, but she couldn’t rip her gaze from the headline: “Glenn Miller Missing in Action over English Channel”. “They never found his plane,” she murmured, not thinking as she spoke the words. “They called it the end of the swing era.”

“You were so angry that no one knew what happened to him. That nobody had any answers. You were just thirteen, but—hell, every teacher you’d ever had had told us about your gift for writing. Told us you were college material. Told us we better count our pennies, because you were gonna go somewhere big. And you decided, then, you wanted to be a journalist. You wanted to tell people what happened when nobody else had any answers. You wanted to be the one people turned to when they needed the truth. And you weren’t going to let anybody stop you from telling it, either.” He had never looked so small before, but his eyes were bright, crystalline, holding more wisdom than she ever would have thought possible from the man who threw her away. “You got your answers. You told those families what happened to their daughters—and who did it to them. You’re more than I ever dreamed you could be.” He extended one tired hand and rested it on the side of the bed. Reluctantly, Lana took it in her own. The chill of his fingers burned her palm. “I’m so proud of you, cricket. And I love you.”

“I love you, too, Daddy.”
He glanced back up to Mary Eunice, whose bright eyes had dimmed into half-open slits, cheek resting on Lana’s shoulder, warm breath fanning across her face with an even rhythm. “Take care of that girl. She likes you. I know it.” Lana’s gaze fell to the side of Mary Eunice’s face, peaceful in her brief doze. “You deserve all the love in the world. Don’t be afraid to let her love you. Or anyone else.”

Lana cracked a tiny smile. “She’s not like that.”

“I think she is.” He smiled in return, broader with each passing moment. He had no remaining teeth. “I want you to be happy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted, really. I want you to be happy, Lana, and I—I’m—It’s for not seeing it sooner, that your happiness is different from what I always expected it to be, but that doesn’t mean it’s worth less.”

She allowed a patient, tired sigh to flush from her nose. “I was happy, Daddy. For a really long time.” *I doubt I’ll ever get that again. I wouldn’t deserve it if I did.* She had already had the great love of her life. But, to sate him, she said, “Maybe I’ll find it again one day.”

“I think you already have.” He lingered on Mary Eunice, and then his eyes drifted away, and he withdrew his hand. “Goodnight, cricket.” He exhaled, long and deep. “If I live til Christmas, tell your mama I said I’m sorry. She’s so damn worried about orchestrating the funeral around the church Christmas party…” In spite of herself, Lana laughed, lifting a hand to her mouth to muffle it. *Of course.*

He said nothing more. In the silence, Lana shifted Mary Eunice, tugging her nearer and spreading the itchy hospital blanket over her. Mary Eunice sniffed into brief wakefulness. “Sh,” Lana hushed her. “Go back to sleep. I was just getting comfy.” She turned sideways, Mary Eunice curled up on top of her. As she smoothed down the blanket, Mary Eunice cuddled closer and rested her head on the flat part of Lana’s chest. “Are you warm enough?” Mary Eunice hummed in vague agreement. *She’s worn down to the bone.* “Good.” Lana kissed the top of her veil. “Let’s get some rest.” Some part of her sensed he wouldn’t awaken again to require their attention.

Mary Eunice stirred just a bit more. “You okay?” she mumbled in a thick slur, bleary blue eyes wandering up to hers.

“Yes, sunshine, I’m fine.” *I think I am, anyway.* “Goodnight.” Mary Eunice managed nothing in return, and the world fell to silence.
The sounds of the house rumbling around Lana stirred her into wakefulness on the top bunk of the bed where they had crashed after six o’clock when Timothy had brought them back home. She rattled through another snore, dry eyes darting around the room, before she rubbed her eyes with her fists. Afternoon sun beamed through the window. The gray sky overlooked the line of bare, wintry trees, bark stripped silver by frost. It never snowed here—it was too far south, too warm—but the brown grass and coat of dew sent her reaching for a jacket from her suitcase. “Mary Eunice?” The lower bunk was made up, sheets and blankets tucked in, pillow fluffed. Of course she’s already awake.

Shrieks of children reverberated through the halls. Oh, Christ almighty. Lana peeked in the mirror and combed her greasy hair. They finally got a bathtub. No more tin basin baths. I’ve gotta shower and wash my hair. Still, the night’s sleep had done wonders for her appearance, circles faded from beneath her eyes, skin not as haggard, and the change of clothes banished the layers of dog hair and wrinkles which had dotted her for the days of travel. As she exited the bedroom, a baby wailed. The oldest girl and boy wrestled in the living room floor. The boy twin had wrapped up his fists in the girl twin’s hair, and the middle girl fought to separate them. He didn’t relinquish his grip. The girl with her tangled hair cried out in pain. The older one whipped around. “Stuart pulling Sue’s hair!” she wailed. “Terry!”

Terry, the oldest, severed from her game with the boy and went to wrench Stuart away from her sister. The toddler unhooked his claws from Sue’s hair, but just as fast, he sank his teeth into Terry’s arm. Screeching in pain, she hurled him away. “He bit me!” He landed on his ass. For a moment, Lana expected him to throw back and start crying alongside Sue, but instead, he considered before he went to lunge at her again, intent on pulling her hair. Did they leave me alone here with the kids? Without telling me? Or waking me up?

With a gust of wind, Mary Eunice breezed out of the kitchen and pushed the baby at Lana. She caught him squirming under the arms. His fat, round head lolled back, surveying her with big brown eyes, and his hands reached for her. “Uh—what do I…?”

Mary Eunice paid her no attention. She scooped up Stuart under the arms effortlessly. “No biting. No hair-pulling.” Her measured strides channeled her inner Sister Jude, expression stern. As she passed by, Lana scrambled to the left, keeping well out of her way. The toddler tossed his head back in a caterwaul of protest, but in spite of the proximity to her ear, Mary Eunice gave no indication she heard him. She planted him in the corner of the kitchen, nose right against the blank wall. “Time-out. Four minutes.” She lifted her eyes to the clock mounted on the wall, one hand firm on the back of the child’s neck. He fussed and whined and crossed his arms and stomped his feet, but she didn’t relent.

“Gotta pee!” he whined. She ignored him.

Lana waited in the silence, holding the baby at arm’s length, too astonished by the shift in roles of her beloved friend to make a sound. The baby’s face turned in distress. Oh no. Lana couldn’t

All Israel Had Mourned

Chapter Notes

1 Samuel 28:3

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remember the last time she had held a baby—probably when she was still in high school, when Wendy had to babysit her younger siblings. How do I do this? She scooped him into her arms in an awkward cradle, uncertain how to support all of him appropriately. He’s so long. Were babies always this long? “What’s this one’s name?” Lana whispered, afraid of violating the silence Mary Eunice had established for the toddler’s time-out.

“Rex.”

“Right.” I didn’t remember that. He grabbed onto Lana’s nose. Her face twisted as his other hand pawed at her eye, roaming her cheeks, the structure of her bones with some wonder written on his expression, some confusion. He found her hair, but instead of grabbing and tugging, he patted her, the way one would pat a friendly dog or horse on the shoulder. Bubbles formed on his small pursed lips. She peered at Mary Eunice out of the corner of her eye, pleading silently for some support, but Mary Eunice waited without hindrance, both eyes fixed upon the hands of the clock, ticking onward without any inhibition.

The second hand passed the twelve, and Mary Eunice released Stuart. “No more biting.” Through narrow blue eyes, she bore down upon him. His lip trembled. Fat tears slid down his flushed red cheeks. “No more hair-pulling. No scratching. Do you understand?” He bobbed his head with a garbled, unintelligible whimper. He’s crying like she whipped him. “Good. Go on and play.”

He broke away from her and ran back to his siblings. Lana tried to separate Rex from her face, but he yelped a protest and wrapped his fist up in a lock of her hair. “Oh no. Ow, ow! Help!” Mary Eunice stepped up and used her fingers to disentangle his tiny digits from her hair, but as she reclaimed him, he screwed up his face and cried. “Why is he crying? He was fine just a minute ago!”

“He wants you to hold him. You look like his mother.” Mary Eunice bounced him on her hip. Lana scanned her once for the first time in the morning. She had showered. Her hair was drawn back into a ponytail, high on her head, presumably so none of the children would use it against her. She wore a long skirt and a sweater. A pleasant, fruity scent clung to her, matching the shampoo Frieda once used.

“Were you just going to stand there and watch the child apocalypse happen?” Mary Eunice asked, a teasing smile upon her lips.

Lana shrugged. “I was too busy trying to figure out why on earth anyone would leave me alone with eight children.” She brought a hand to her temple. “I feel like I just walked onto the set of the Sound of Music,” she muttered.

“Six children,” Mary Eunice corrected. “Two of them are still inside Frieda.”

“How fortunate. We came here early enough to keep her from saddling you with newborns.” Lana fought to keep the dryness out of her tone. Frieda probably doesn't get a lot of help with the kids. But Mary Eunice isn't her nanny. If she didn't want all these kids, she shouldn't have had them. “Where did everyone run off to?”

Mary Eunice's gaze softened, melancholy easing into the deep blue of her eyes. “The funeral home,” she answered in a quiet voice, all the implications carried woefully upon her whisper. “It was this morning. Your mother was with him. I offered to stay with the children so Frieda could be with her while Roger and Timothy tried to get out of work. John couldn’t get out of work.”

The baby reached to wrap his fists into her golden hair, twining his tiny fingers into the mess, but Mary Eunice’s face gave no indication of the intrusion in her hair. “I—I knew you were tired. I asked them not to wake you. I thought it was better if you got your rest.”

Something deep inside Lana’s chest ached, a dull throb of an old scar opening anew. It didn’t rip into her, but somehow the lack of agony was worse. It left an empty gap inside of her where she
should have mourned. *I mourned for him long ago.* She had grieved someone who still lived; she had considered him dead to her. *Was that wrong?* Wendy had tried to reach out, but Lana never had. Should she have tried? Should she have tried something, anything, to win over her family once again? Or would it have made no difference? “What about your rest?”

A weak smile shivered upon Mary Eunice’s lips in spite of her tearful eyes. “I couldn’t possibly sleep without you beside me.” The baby drew back his hand with several strands of yellow hair wrapped around his fingers. She winced but made no audible complaint. “I was afraid you would roll out of bed and fall all night. I was trying to lay out my plan to catch you until I heard the phone ring.” She took a hand and tugged the strings of hair away from Rex, checking each of his little fingers to ensure none of them had made tourniquets. “Are you okay?”

The sight of Mary Eunice entertaining the baby with such tenderness set a flame in the pit of Lana’s stomach. *She’s so good with him.* “I will be.” With a fussy noise, Rex held out his arms to her, forming an O shape with his lips and whimpering. His fine mop of brown hair and deep eyes mirrored Frieda’s, mirrored her own. The uncanny resemblance unsettled her. “I’m a dog person. Not a kid person,” she said, sheepish. Lana took a few steps back to retreat, but his fussy mewl blossomed into a louder cry. “Oh no.”

“He hasn’t eaten. His bottle is in the sink. It should be warm by now.” Mary Eunice went to the sofa. Across the room, Terry played with the little radio until it crackled to life, and the other children applauded at the distinct rumble of a guitar and a man’s drawling voice crafting lyrics of heartbreak. Lana grabbed the bottle for her and followed. The hair on the back of her neck stood up at the sound of the crying baby. “Do you want to feed him?”

“Pass.” Lana gave her the bottle and sat on the sofa beside her. The carefree children kept their faces buried into the speaker, like it would bring them nearer to Sonny James’s voice if they pressed their ears right against it. “Do they know?” she whispered.

Mary Eunice shook her head. “Frieda wanted John to be home when they explained it to them.” She tested the temperature of the milk on her wrist before she offered it to Rex, and he wrapped his mouth around the nipple of the bottle, both hands going to hold the bottle steady. Mary Eunice cradled him close against her, her eyes fixed upon his face. He sucked at the nipple with greedy gulps. “Somebody is hungry!” Mary Eunice cooed. She brushed his locks out of his eyes. “Not too fast, buddy. I don’t want you to get a tummy ache.” She glanced back at Lana. “Are you sure you don’t want to hold him? He doesn’t bite, I promise. You keep looking at him like he’s an alien or something.”

Lana shook her head. “No—No, I’ll pass. I just…” Her teeth troubled her lower lip, scraping upon it, and her thumb nail scratched against her index finger. “It’s silly, but I—I can’t stop thinking about what mine would’ve looked like.” She glanced back down to the baby, not yet turning his face away from the bottle, though his greedy swallows had slowed. “If I had been strong enough to—to deal with it, at least for a few months.”

Mary Eunice pursed her lips. “You didn’t act out of weakness, Lana. I—I think you did the right thing. You never could have been happy if you were worrying about your son somewhere out in the world, being raised by strangers, or finding out who you are and where he came from. It would’ve been cruel for you to keep him and never love him.”

“What if it was twins? Apparently they run in my family, and—”

“It wasn’t.” Lana’s face froze at the sudden words, and her heart froze. Mary Eunice averted her gaze. “It wasn’t. I—I looked. It wasn’t much, but it—it was something. About two inches long. Just one.” Rex pushed the bottle out of his mouth, and Mary Eunice lifted him up and patted his back and rocked him, trying to get him to burp. “We had a few miscarriages at Briarcliff. I knew
what to look for.”

Oh, god. Lana’s belly flipped. Nausea blossomed inside the pit of her stomach. Why did I take her with me? She didn’t deserve that. She’s too soft. The world has been so hard to her. “I’m sorry.” She wanted to take one of Mary Eunice’s hands, but both were occupied with the baby. “Do you feel guilty?”

Mary Eunice shook her head. “No. I...I confessed, because that’s my duty, but I’m not remorseful. That may make the confession void. But... I believe God put my feet on the path to support you and gave me the courage to do it. That makes you my duty as well.” She held Lana’s gaze. “Do you feel guilty?”

A wry snort came from Lana’s nose. “No. Not at all. I’m relieved. I wonder about what might’ve happened, but those scenarios are all much less happy than this one.” She had done the right thing. Mary Eunice’s reassurance only reinforced it. “I am struggling with how to write it in my book, though. Without being totally dishonest or making myself a larger target for a hate crime.”

The baby belched. “It’ll all come to you in good time,” Mary Eunice told her with a small smile. Rex cooed and lifted up his hands, reaching to stick another fistful of her hair into his mouth. “Are you sure you don’t want to hold him? He’s really cute.” Lana’s gaze fell down to his round face again, the dimples on his cheeks and the upward curve to his upper lip, the upturn to his nose. She shrugged and nodded, resigning herself to the inevitability of holding him. Mary Eunice’s smile bloomed into a grin, wider than an Easter lily emerging from the bud. Giggling with delight, she passed the baby to Lana. His broad, toothy smile flashed up at her, and one hand secured around her nose. A gargling laugh rose from him. “He likes you.”

“He likes my nose hair.”

Mary Eunice laughed again, bumping her head against Lana’s shoulder. The warm, fresh scent of her tempted Lana, inches away, but then three pairs of eyes rounded upon them from the radio, and they severed, wheat separated from the stem by a scythe. Terry got up, appointed the ringleader by her siblings, and Bruce and Cindy followed; Sue and Stuart had sprawled out in the middle of the floor, playing with little figurines. “Miss Sister?” Lana bit back her chuckle at the girl’s soft words, her misinterpretation of the title adorable and all too indicative of her roots. “We’re hungry.”

Mary Eunice didn’t correct her. “Are you?” She stood. “Let’s see what we can do about that, then. Do you want a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?” They all three bobbed their heads. “C’mon with me, then, and I’ll fix you right up.” She led them to the kitchen, and they all followed like a line of ants. After a moment alone in the silence, Lana followed, holding the baby on her hip.

It took Mary Eunice only a few minutes to make the three sandwiches; she somehow managed to do it with all of them in synchronization, so none of the sandwiches was finished before the others and none of the children saw a reason to complain or fight over them (Lana considered this quite impressive, recalling her own tendency to evaluate anything given to Frieda with envy as a girl and thinking, It’s a wonder she doesn’t hate me.). She sawed off the crust of the bread and cut each sandwich into quarters. “Scoot over,” Terry said, bumping Cindy over in the chair, which she had scrambled to get into. “Let me help you. Mama’ll be mad if you get the peanut butter all over your face again.” The oldest child guided the other’s small, clumsy hands to grapple with the quarter-sized pieces and lift them to her mouth.

Bruce paid no heed to his sisters; he wolfed down half of his sandwich and a few deep swallows of milk before he hopped up from his chair. “Thank you, ma’am!” he chimed. Mary Eunice answered his gratitude with a small smile. “Can I go play with your dog?”
“Sure. Don’t let him off his tether.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He headed for the door; it was quite a reach, but he managed to open it and hold it open long enough to slip through. It slammed hard behind him. Through the wall, his voice echoed, “Hey there, buddy!”

Lana inclined her eyebrows. “Are you sure he’ll be alright?”

“I took out his stitches this morning. He’ll be fine. Dogs were made to play with children. He can take a few hits.” Mary Eunice picked up the two quarters of the sandwich Bruce had left behind and offered one piece to Lana. I feel like I haven’t eaten in days. She shifted the baby in her arms and took the piece, shoving it into her mouth and swallowing without chewing. Mary Eunice laughed as she nibbled on the other piece of the sandwich. “I’ll cook something for us later, when we give Rex some tummy time.”

What? “What the hell is tummy time?”

Terry yelped and clapped her hands over her ears. “Lana!” Mary Eunice admonished. She cringed at the sharp tone to her voice. An embarrassed blush flushed all over her face. “No cursing! Apologize!”

The sharp words made Lana blink with incredulity. Mary Eunice delivered the commands the same way she had barked at Stuart earlier for pulling Sue’s hair—like a naughty child who had violated an established rule. She’s gone into mom-mode. In spite of herself, Lana fought the urge to laugh. “How old do you think I am?” Mary Eunice’s ordinary complacency had vanished in her role as caregiver. It’s sweet. She’s sweet. She would’ve made a good mother. Lana knew better than to entertain fantasies, yet she couldn’t help herself. She had a dream, once, that we had a baby. She told me about it. Lana couldn’t remember the name of the baby in Mary Eunice’s dream, but now, she reflected upon the image fondly—the two of them, caring for an infant, sharing the duties, forming a family. The family Wendy always wanted. Lana had no desire for a family now, knowing she could not share it with Wendy, but the sweet daydream of a future they would never experience warmed her soul nonetheless.

At Lana’s question, Mary Eunice reconsidered her words, and her cheeks flushed pink. “Sorry.” She collected the empty plate Bruce had left behind, putting the glass of milk in the fridge, turning away to hide her shame.

Don’t be sorry. I think it’s cute. Lana knew better than to say those words, especially with Frieda’s children so near. Clearing her throat, she sat down opposite Terry and Cindy, holding Rex in her lap. “I’m sorry I cursed. Please don’t tell your mother.”

Terry offered a tentative smile. “It’s alright, Aunt Lana. Nobody likes a tattletale. Right, Cindy?” She nudged the younger one in the side, and at the prompting, Cindy nodded her head in agreement. “We won’t say anything. Promise.”

Nobody has ever called me Aunt before. Lana mulled it over. She wasn’t sure she cared for it. But what else would they call her? Any other titles were even more loathsome. We won’t be here long, anyway. It won’t matter anymore. She couldn’t fool herself into thinking her family would magically welcome her back. Her father had come around, had changed his mind, but now he was gone. She had no doubt her mother would expect her to leave the moment the funeral ended.

“Thanks.” Lana paused a moment, and then she continued, “But, in the future, you should tell your mama things. Just not this once, alright?”

“Alright,” Terry agreed. Cindy took another sip of milk, leaving a tiny puddle on the table from
the numerous spills, before she slid out of the chair, leaving behind another half a sandwich. Lana took a piece and waited for Mary Eunice to finish washing the other plate before she offered the last quarter to her. “Aunt Lana? Can I ask you something?”

“Sure thing.” The baby wrapped his hands around her fingers and bent them one by one, admiring them with wide eyes, like he had never seen such a wondrous invention before in his short life. He lifted her fingers to his mouth, and with a grimace, she allowed him to suck and bite on her digits. Mary Eunice dried the plate and put it in the cupboard, and then she brought Lana a glass of tea. “Oh, thanks.” She flashed a smile upward at the unexpected gift. Mary Eunice stood behind her seat, not yet sitting down; she hovered over Lana like a protective guardian angel staking her claim on a troubled soul.

A ring of milk surrounded Terry’s mouth. “Are you gonna die?”

Mary Eunice made a faint astonished choking sound. Lana blinked, biting back her own shock at the blunt query. Don’t be stupid. She’s just a little girl. She didn’t mean anything by it. “Everyone dies eventually, sweetheart. But I don’t think I’m going to die soon, no. What makes you ask?”

Terry shrugged. “I heard Mama and Daddy talking, last night, with Granny, about you. Granny said you came home because you were sick. Grandaddy is sick, and now he’s gonna die. I thought, maybe, it was something the same.” She nibbled on the corner of her sandwich with a considerate frown upon her face, a knitted wrinkle between her brows. “Was Granny lying, then? Mama got awful ill with her. Had a real spat. Couldn’t none of us sleep.”

Clearing her throat, Lana wrapped her hand around the cool glass of iced tea, uncertain how to answer. Her heart squelched in pain. How could she explain this to a child—her sister’s child, no less? Frieda would kill her if she put a foot out of place here. To her surprise, Mary Eunice’s warm hands landed upon her shoulders, providing some marginal comfort; she massaged into the muscles of Lana’s tense neck. Then she slipped them into Lana’s hair. It’s a guise. Lana swallowed hard at the realization. Mary Eunice found a way to comfort her without drawing any attention to them by braiding her hair.

It didn’t. “Is it catching?”

Lana chuckled. “No, it’s not catching. You don’t have anything to worry about. Promise.”

“What is it? Could I have it?”

Curling her toes upon the tile, Lana leaned forward, resting an elbow on the table without any thought to her manners. “No, you don’t have it. Trust me.” Terry’s small mouth curled downward into a pout. No, no, please don’t cry. “Here, listen. When you think about what you want to do with your life, when you’re a grown-up, what do you want to do? Marry a handsome man and have lots of babies?”

Terry’s whole face contorted. “Ew! No way! I never want babies. Being a mommy is like being the oldest, but worse.”

Behind her, Mary Eunice chuckled, shaking her head. She combed her hand through Lana’s braids and let them all fall loose once again. It’s just because she’s the oldest. Of course she doesn’t want any kids. You never wanted any kids, either. The reminder of her own childhood didn’t soothe Lana. She chewed her inner cheek and persisted, “But you do want to get married, don’t you?”

“Eh.” Another shrug. “I don’t really wanna get stuck with a boy. They ruin all the fun. They say I
can’t play baseball with them. They’re just afraid I’ll win. But if I do get married, I want him to be in the army, so I can get the house all to myself when he’s away and my best friend, Linda, can come over. Then we can play catch by ourselves without any boys.” She took another bite from her sandwich, and the peanut butter stopped up her voice. “I don’t want no boy telling me what to do. Daddy tells Mama everything. He don’t want her to get a job. I wanna get a job. I don’t want no man to take care of everything for me.” Swallowing dry and solid, she looked back up to Lana. “What’s it matter to you? Mama said you ain’t married. My teacher at school, Miss Barrett, she ain’t married, neither. And Betty at church ain’t either. What’s that gotta do with anything?”

The self-assuredness in Lana’s stomach dissolved into a mound of concern. The parallels between how Teresa answered the questions and how she would’ve answered them around the same age alarmed her. “Oh, it’s—it’s nothing.” Her confidence refused to beam through into her voice. “There’s nothing wrong with you. I promise.” She smiled. “Your Mama will explain it when you’re older, but you’re fine just the way you are.”

“I’m not sick?”

“No. That’s my official diagnosis.” Lana winked at her. Terry excused herself and fled from the table, bursting through the door to join Bruce and Gus. Mary Eunice’s hands stilled in her hair but lingered there, flush against the back of her neck. Lana lifted her head up, seeking eye contact. In a bare whisper, she said, “She’s a lesbian.”

Mary Eunice raised her eyebrows. “Lana,” she placated.

“I’m not kidding. I would’ve answered all those questions the same way when I was her age. It’s not good. She’s not a normal kid.” Lana wrung her hands. The baby began to slip off of her thigh, and she lifted him up for Mary Eunice to take him again. She did, finally taking a seat at the table. “God, I wish there were something I could do. She’s going to go through everything I went through—”

“Lana!” Mary Eunice interrupted, again using her mom tone, but when Lana stopped, her words softened. “She’s six. I would’ve answered all those questions the same, too. Being the oldest is hard. You were watching her, weren’t you? She waited to eat to feed her sister. Her whole life is like that. Of course she doesn’t want children. And she may change her mind.”

“What about not wanting a husband?”

“What about it? Boys still have cooties to her.” Mary Eunice bounced the baby on her knee, holding each of his tiny hands in her own. They fit in her palms. “I never wanted a husband at her age, even when I was older, and I married the perfect man.”

A giggle worked its way up from Lana in spite of her resignation against it. She shook her head, a hand to her temple. “But would you have gotten married? If the church wasn’t an option?” I can’t imagine her with a man. A man would corrupt her. She is pure like this.

Mary Eunice avoided her gaze, planting it on top of the baby’s head. “I—I suppose I would’ve, because I wouldn’t have wanted to be alone, but… I can’t imagine I would’ve enjoyed the arrangement very much. Any of it. I just—I doubt I would’ve made a very good wife, and I never wanted to have children, and…” Her face tinged into a pink blush. She mussed Rex’s hair and then straightened it again as if to create a distraction. “I can’t imagine having to make love to a man.” I can’t imagine you doing it. The image struck Lana regardless—Mary Eunice’s nude body, the expanse of snowy skin, stretched beneath a faceless man, legs extended and spread, head tilted back with pleasure or with pain. “I know love
between a man and a woman is holy, but I don’t think I’m capable of feeling such a thing.”

“At all?” Lana arched an eyebrow. How could she never entertain the idea of loving a man? Even once? Or not imagine herself experiencing romance, however putrid, with a man.

Mary Eunice jerked her head back up, eyes round as a deer in headlights. “I—I don’t know,” she hedged, shy, quieter than usual. “I guess God is the only one for me. He intends some of us for Him, so we will dedicate our lives to His service. It’s only right that He made me this way if He knew none of that was in my future.”

Of course. She believes this is fate, not a matter of chance. “Right. It does make sense.”

The rumbling sound of a motor outside rattled the house, and they both rose, heading toward the front door. Sue and Stuart wrapped themselves around Lana’s legs, each clinging to a limb, while Mary Eunice cradled the baby. Cindy paid them no heed, ear pressed to the radio. Mary Eunice called Bruce and Terry back inside. The old car hummed to a stop, and the four people clambered out of it in synchronization—Timothy and Roger huddling like they needed to protect themselves from the chill, Frieda with an arm around her mother’s waist, supporting the older woman. They all had eyes rimmed with dark red and sniffles rising from their swollen noses.

Mary Eunice retreated from her side, joining the children in the living room, but Lana remained on the porch to greet the others; she had nothing else she could offer them but her presence. Roger hugged her long and deep, and his body quivered with a sob, but he didn’t weep against her. Tim squeezed her hand; sweat, tears, and snot had dampened his palm. Frieda stopped in front of her, shivering like a dejected dog left out in the snow. Tugging her into a calm embrace, Lana wrapped her arms tight around her and pecked one of the tears off of her cheek. Frieda’s gravid abdomen pressed against her. Through it, a fluttering of movement stirred, and this alit a fresh fire of grief from her. They will never know him. “I’m so sorry, Frieda,” she whispered. She hadn’t just lost her father. She had lost the grandfather of her children. “I’m so sorry.”

As Frieda separated, sniffling and wiping her face with her hands in some attempt to remain composed for her kids, Helen scanned Lana. The reproachfulness upon her face hadn’t faded overnight. Lana’s arms opened on reflex, but she reconsidered and dropped them. Her mother didn’t want to hug her. Her mother didn’t deserve to hug her. She cleared her throat and turned away to follow the others inside. “Lana.” Her own name, croaked by a woman grieving the love of her life, made her freeze. The screen door slammed shut after Frieda, and the children swarmed their mother, but through the great heap of bodies, Mary Eunice’s eyes glowed, keeping a watchful eye upon the two of them. She’s watching. She wants to keep me safe. “Look at me when I’m speaking to you.”

Reluctantly, Lana faced her, jaw set tight. “Do you want me to leave now?” She stared hard at her mother’s eyebrows, unable to make eye contact but refusing to show weakness by averting her eyes.

“No.” Helen stepped nearer. Gus tugged against his tether to smell her shoes. Lana grabbed him by the string and pulled him away, fearing her mother would lash out and kick him, but Helen paid no attention to him. “I want to ask you to stay.”

“Stay?”

“Not indefinitely, but—at least through Christmas. Frieda needs help, and Timothy and Roger are busy working at the police department, and John can’t take off of work, and she’s pregnant. She can’t herd around six children while she’s grieving. It’s not good for her. Help us make it through the holiday.”
Lana narrowed her eyes. “I was under the impression you wanted me in and out as quickly as possible.” She couldn’t pinch the accusatory tone out of her own voice. “Has that changed?”

“I never said that. I expect you to abide by my rules while you’re under my roof.”

“Well, that won’t be a problem. Wendy’s dead,” Lana spat. The hair on the back of her neck pricked, standing up against her mother’s scrutiny. She forced her hands to remain flat, fearful of them becoming sharp fists. “I’m sorry that you found out about us the way you did. We were stupid to do that here. But she isn’t here now.”

“There’s that other woman.”

“Sister Mary Eunice is unavailable. She took vows of celibacy. She explained all of that to you.” Lana crossed her arms and lifted her head, resisting the urge to set her jaw hard against whatever her mother intended to throw at her. “I told you I haven’t changed. If you want that, I can’t give it to you. I want to live in peace with my dog and my nun. God knows I deserve it.”

“I don’t want you to change. I just—” Helen’s throat closed around her words. Her face crumpled into a pink heap; for the first time in Lana’s memory, she watched her mother cry, and her broken heart somehow managed to lose another chip. “I just lost the love of my life, and I want my family to be here. And—And I realize that’s probably what you wanted, and we weren’t there to give it to you. I want you here, now.” Her wearied, wrinkled face, indicative of her age, cried from all of its pores, tears making streaks instead of drops. “And I’m afraid now is too late for you to forgive me.”

Lana gulped. Humans weren’t designed to watch their mothers cry. She blinked, long and slow, resisting the urge to drop on her knees and beg forgiveness herself—the way her heart insisted was proper. “We never did see eye to eye.” And now, she averted her gaze, her resolve against it wavering. “Do you want me here because you feel guilty? Or because you think you can fix me?”

“No.” Her dark hair spiraled around her head as she shook her head with vehemence. “I don’t want that. Your daddy—he figured it out, and I thought I could humor him because I didn’t want him to die feeling like he had unfinished business, but god, he was right. We chased you away, and that was wrong of us. That was so wrong of us.” She muffled her mouth with one hand, covering her lips, shaking her head; her shoulders hunched over, protecting against the agony of loss in her belly—the agony Lana knew far too well, the pain she had known in the first days after emerging from Briarcliff, when she could only bear to lie in bed and curl up, wondering why she had ever wanted to survive in a world which no longer had Wendy. I don’t feel like that anymore. Mary Eunice always warmed her when the anguish threatened to take over. She didn’t take the grief away, but she shared it, and having someone to mourn with her made the burden more surmountable. “I’m so sorry. I let you down. I always loved you, but I was shitty at showing it—I didn’t know how to love you. And I don’t know how I can make it up to you, either. It took me so long to realize that there’s nothing there for me to fix—maybe there’s something wrong with what you’re doing, but I can’t change it, and it’s not my business to decide that. It’s my business to love you. I’m sorry I forgot that.”

“Mama, I…” Lana closed her mouth to keep from speaking too soon. “I did alright. We both did. We took care of ourselves, and we took care of each other.” She hesitated, lip between her teeth, before she extended a hand and took her mother’s weathered hand in her own, rubbing it to restore the warmth to the bony fingers. “It hurt us, but we picked up. We did well.” She rubbed her thumb over one of the callouses on her mother’s knuckles. “We were happy.”

“Do you hate me?”

Lowering her eyes, Lana shook her head. “I did for awhile.” Wendy handled the hurt with tears;
Lana handled it with loathing. When the times of the year came around for families to spend time together, Wendy wept, and Lana held her and hated the people who had caused her such pain. “But I don’t anymore.” Too much time had passed. The water, however stormy, rested under the bridge, and she had far more pain to deal with now than the rejection of her family. “I learned from someone very wise that dwelling bitterly on the past isn’t an effective way to deal with my problems.” Mary Eunice. She told me that, months ago, before I knew I loved her.

The skeletal hand tightened around her own in a squeeze, the closest her mother had touched her since she arrived. “Can you ever forgive me?”

A watery smile flexed upon her lips. “If you can forgive me.”

“Darling, there was never anything to forgive.” Darling. Lana couldn’t remember if her mother had ever called her a pet name before. In her memory, Frieda had all the pet names; she was her father’s cricket, his baby girl, his slugger, but her mother had never invested the affection in her. Did Mary Eunice’s mother ever call her something so sweet? Does she remember? Mary Eunice would have cut off her own limbs for this opportunity. Knowing that, Lana folded her mother into a tight hug, the first embrace she had offered since arriving. Hugged so tight, she felt like a little girl again, her face buried in the crook of her mother’s neck, arms looped around her, inhaling the sweet scent of her mother’s lotion.

A motor rumbled down the driveway. They severed at the sight of it. An unfamiliar truck, streaked with muck and dirt, crawled toward the house. Gus pounced to his paws and barked once, twice, the sound echoing against the bare tree trunks. “Who the hell is that?” Lana asked, squinting into the sun; she couldn’t make out the face of the man behind the wheel, nothing besides the whiskers upon his face. Helen turned away and opened the screen door. “Mama?”

Somebody means trouble. Her dorky kid brothers were now the men of the house. God help us all.

They both filed out of the front door. The driver stepped out of the car, planting his feet upon the clay soil. Mary Eunice’s face also appeared at the door, not stepping through until Frieda flanked her, and they joined the family, leaving the six children inside. “Lana, go inside,” Helen ordered. Mary Eunice tiptoed beside her, gathering up Gus’s tether in her hand so he wouldn’t lunge. “Now.”

Beneath the shadows of the cowboy hat, Fred Peyser glowered at them, clad in a heavy flannel and boots dirtier than his truck. He used a rifle as a walking stick. “No.” Out of reflex, Lana offered her hand to Mary Eunice, but Mary Eunice glanced at her out of the corner of her eye and didn’t accept the invitation. Not in front of all of them. We can’t. “He’s here for me, isn’t he?”

“You’re here to blow your face off!” Frieda hissed, grabbing her by the wrist, but no matter how she tugged, Lana held firm. “Lana, please! Mama! Can’t we call the police or something? My kids are here!”

“Me and Tim are the police.” Roger tilted back on his heels, drawing himself up taller, crossing his arms, lifting his chin. “Do you want me to talk to him, Mama?” Even a cop asks her what he should do first. If Lana’s heart hadn’t turned itself into a woodpecker, she would have found it laughable.

Helen set her jaw. “What do you want, Fred?”

Wendy’s father spat on the ground. “I heard through the grapevine the little dyke that could was back in town. Thought I might drop by to see the public safety hazard in the flesh.”
Gus’s hackles rose. A guttural growl fumed from deep within his chest. Mary Eunice planted both hands on his tether and dragged him back, but she kept both eyes fixed upon the man, who lifted the rifle off of the ground. She shuffled to the side. What the hell is she doing? She lifted her head, no longer hunched at the shoulders, and blotted Lana’s line of sight with her own silhouette—blotted her from view. She’s protecting me. Hot tears stung Lana’s eyes. Mary Eunice moved into the line of fire, preparing to take a bullet for her, without so much of a discussion or a glance back at her for approval. Lana eased behind her and planted a hand on her shoulder, and as Mary Eunice looked back at her, Lana shook her head. No one else is going to get hurt because of me. She stepped beside her again.

“I’d appreciate if you didn’t slander my daughter on my property. And if that’s all you’ve come here for, shove that gun up your ass and go home. We’ve got a funeral to plan.”

“So you’ve chosen to disgrace Landon by welcoming this monstrosity back onto his heritage land.”

“I’ve chosen to respect my husband by honoring his wishes that the four of his children be present for his death. And I’ve chosen to respect my daughter. Both of those are more than you can say—you told the congregation at Sally’s funeral you only had six children.”

Wendy’s mother is dead. Lana’s heart sank. Wendy would’ve been destroyed if she had known, if anyone had even bothered to pick up the phone and tell her. It would’ve broken her heart, knowing she didn’t get the chance to say goodbye. The ignorance had killed her, made her weep every holiday, but this? This was evil. “It was Sally’s wish.” He planted one hand on his hip, fixing both cold eyes upon Lana. “You shouldn’t be here, faggot!” he shouted, pointing at her with the rifle. “You don’t belong with our kind! Take your yankee ass back outta the state of Georgia before I move it for you! And whatever ugly piece of ass you’ve got there replacing Winifred, take it with you!” Mary Eunice flinched as he addressed her.

She isn’t ugly!

Lana fumed, but before she could reply, her mother marched down the stairs of the porch. Face to face, Fred stood eight inches taller than her, but Helen’s hands formed sharp fists, and a cool shiver rushed down Lana’s spine; all four of the Winters children recognized her as a force to be reckoned with in this state, at her most outraged. “My daughter,” she purred, “will be on my property as long as she likes. Your inability to love your child will haunt you, but it’s no skin off my back. I’ve chosen to love what God gave me. We will stand before the same throne on Judgment Day, and no angel will fault me because I turned my back on my posterity.” Helen tilted her head back and crossed her arms. “And Sister Mary Eunice blessed and prayed for my husband before his death. She’s more than welcome anywhere on this land. She chose to come all this way to be with our family during our hour of need, and I will not allow anyone to disrespect her sacrifices in supporting us.”

Fred curled his lip as he appraised them. “When’s the funeral?”

“Tomorrow. Landon wanted to be buried before Christmas, so it wouldn’t interfere with the church party.” A slight breeze stirred, making the barren trees sway, a few dead branches cracking off and falling in the woods; it caught Helen’s skirt and hair, blowing them back away from her. “Consider yourself uninvited.”

He slid his gaze over them. “Very well, Helen. Wouldn’t want to do anything obscene at Landon’s funeral. Nothing quite as perverse as bringing a fag.” Helen hissed at him like an offended cat. “No worries, my dear. But I don’t like this being brought into my county. This is a good Christian country. Landon did right fifteen years ago, when he ran it off.”

“You don’t have to like it.”
“No, I don’t.” He pointed the gun at all of them, the barrel passing over each person on the porch the way a teacher would point a ruler at an unruly student. Timothy and Roger puffed up to block Frieda with their own bodies, but Lana held firm, clutching Mary Eunice by the elbow so she wouldn’t do the same. “But I suggest you watch your backs. All of you. I’d hate for pest control to nab one of you... Hate to exterminate a child by mistake. Sometimes, when you’re aiming for a buck, you shoot the doe instead.” His gaze lingered on the place where Frieda’s head poked out between her brothers’ shoulders. “Sometimes you go to butcher her and find her teats full, and you know somewhere out there her babies are starving. Sometimes you cut the fawns right out of her. But it was all because you were aiming for the buck.” A thin whimper rose from Frieda’s throat. She muffled her mouth with her hand, eyes pinching up tight.

Helen slapped the rifle out of his hand. “Get the hell off of my land!” She thrust herself upward, into his space. “And if you ever point a gun at anyone in my family again, I will have the entire police force out here in five minutes flat. We’ll see what you think about empty threats and metaphors from prison.”

At her instruction, he returned to his truck, butt of the rifle dragging the ground behind him. He folded himself back into the cabin of his truck, cranked it up, and revved the engine as he traveled back up the clay driveway, leaving all of them in a cloud of exhaust. Helen lingered a moment before she turned and climbed the stairs to the porch. “That bastard is full of hot air.”

Lana slid her hand down Mary Eunice’s forearm to take her hand, folding their fingers in together, and this time, Mary Eunice didn’t deny her. She dropped Gus’s tether and allowed him to relax. “What if he isn’t?” Frieda asked. Tears swam deep in her eyes. “That man’s crazy!”

“There’s nothing we can do about it,” Roger said. He kept his arms crossed, tapping the toe of one shoe. “He hasn’t tried to hurt anyone, and his threats didn’t make any sense. None of it is grounds for a restraining order—and even that would have to wait until after the first of the year, when the judges will be hearing cases again.” He looked back up to Timothy. “But Mama’s right. He’s harmless.”

“Harmless?” Frieda echoed. “He just pointed a gun at us! At all of us! He threatened my children! Do you expect me to just let that go?”

Lana loosened her fingers from Mary Eunice’s to step nearer to Frieda. “Frieda, it’s alright. He isn’t going to hurt any of us.” Mary Eunice peeked over at them; Frieda’s chest heaved with uneven breaths, face flushing. “Let’s go inside and sit down—”

“No! I am not going to go inside and sit down and calm down! I am pregnant, I just lost my father, and some freaky old man with a loaded gun just threatened me and my children because my weird older sister fucks women!”

From behind the screen door, one of the children asked, “Mama? What does fuck mean?”

Timothy burst out laughing. “It isn’t funny, Tim!” Frieda shrieked. “He could kill us! How can I sleep at night knowing that man is just a mile up the road?”

“What do you want us to do, Freida? Kick him out of his house? We’re cops, not Nazis.”

Lana stepped closer again. “We know Mr. Peyser,” she said; she stopped when Frieda dodged her reach to grasp her hand. “We’ve known him since we were kids. He’s not dangerous. He’s always been a toothless old tiger. He never even spanked his kids. I doubt he’s going to start shooting up the city now.”

“What do you know?” Frieda’s hands snapped into tight fists. “You weren’t here! He’s a
convicted murderer as far as you know! He could have child carcasses stuffed down in his freezer!” Lana recoiled like Frieda had slapped her at the mention of a freezer. *Oh no.* Mary Eunice shuffled between Roger and Timothy to take Lana by the elbow, tugging her back, but Helen fixed her under a hard stare, and she fell back with a gulp. *I can’t interfere without getting us in even more trouble.* “Maybe it’s like Frankenstein’s lair down in his meatlocker—all the people parts chopped up and mashed together—one person’s hair, one person’s legs, one person’s teeth—”

A sweaty palm smacked Frieda into silence. The clapping of skin on skin echoed. The impact darkened in a red mark across her cheek. Mary Eunice sucked in a short breath and covered her mouth with her hands. “Shut your mouth.” Lana’s dark voice held a million threats, but her eyes glittered with tears right on the surface, ready to spill over. Her hands, in spite of their tight fists, shivered, and her jaw had loose jerks, teeth clicking together in her mouth. “Stop talking.”

Frieda loomed into Lana’s space; they stood the same height, but she was more steady than her older sister. “Make me.” She planted two hands on Lana’s shoulders and shoved her backward.

Lana took two steps back in a stumble, but like a spring, she returned with hands outstretched, knocking into Frieda. Freida tangled her hands in Lana’s hair and slung sideways. With the momentum, they both collapsed, rolling down the steps onto the cold earth below. They landed in a tangled heap, Lana underneath Frieda, limbs and dust spraying up from the ground. Timothy hooted, “Woo-hoo! Girl fight!” and jumped up and down. He applauded.

Helen swatted him. “Girls!” she called, but the two feuding women paid no heed to them. “Girls!” she snapped. “Girls! Get your asses off the ground! Girls! How old are you?”

“Mama, they ain’t listening.” Roger shrugged.

One of them shrieked and the other groaned; Frieda had planted a knee into Lana’s abdomen, still tender from the surgery those months ago. Lana elbowed her in the jaw. *Somebody’s gotta stop this.* Mary Eunice headed for the stairs, dropping Gus’s tether. In a flurry, he darted between her legs. His enormous height and burly weight threw her off the side of the porch. “Ow!” All the air rushed from her lungs. “Gus, no!” she wheezed, but she found no wind to put to her voice. Too late, she seized Gus by his tether and tugged him back.

Frieda screamed again. But up on the porch, Timothy erupted into a burst of cackles, and Roger chuckled in spite of himself. Helen turned away as if shamed, rather than concerned. “The full moon shines tonight!” Timothy said. On her hands and knees, Mary Eunice crawled around the stairs of the porch, dragging Gus back with all her strength but unable to free Frieda from his clutches. The dog had the hem of Frieda’s skirt in his mouth and dragged it down—down from where he had already exposed all of her naked buttocks.

Lana lay sprawled on her back in the dirt, winded, while Frieda whirled on Gus, trying to recover her skirt and shake the persistent dog off of her clothing. “Gus, no!” Mary Eunice repeated, staggering to her feet. She grabbed the baling twine again and hauled him backward. “Bad dog! Bad!” Timothy’s shameless roars of laughter grew only louder; he wiped humored tears from his face. Gus trotted up to the laughing man, tail high and ears perked, ready to receive his praise for a job well done. Mary Eunice dropped the tether, headed toward Lana’s side.

Propping herself up on an elbow, Lana squinted up at Mary Eunice through a generous coat of dust on her face. “Is she okay?” Blood trickled from a cut on her lip, but otherwise, she seemed to have emerged in one piece. Dirt clung to the moist streaks of tears on her cheeks, leaving thick rivulets in their wake. Mary Eunice offered Lana a hand, but Lana shook her head. “Check on Frieda,” she repeated.
Mary Eunice hesitated, but Lana waved her off again, so she turned and offered Frieda a hand up instead. “Are you alright?”

However, Frieda’s enraged tirade had not fizzled out yet. She shoved past Mary Eunice to glower down at Lana. “What the fuck is your problem?” she snarled. Lana pushed herself up into a sitting position, both hands planted on the ground, narrow eyes peering up at Frieda. “Didn’t Mama ever teach you not to hit a pregnant woman? Since you wanna be a boy so bad, you never learned none of the boys’ lessons?” Lana’s face flinched at the sharp words, but she had exhausted herself in the first brawl. Her whole body shuddered and sputtered with unsteady bursts of anxiety. She sat there, dejected and forlorn, shivering and sweating. “Did you train your dog to pull down people’s skirts so you can look at their asses?”

“That’s enough.” The voice had no source, but all eyes fixed on Mary Eunice. *Was that me?* A shiver trickled up her spine, a finger spurning her onward. Her courage appeared in Lana’s defense; it lived somewhere she could never locate it until Lana was threatened, and her tongue loosened from the roof of her mouth. “She just didn’t want to talk about people being killed. Gus was trying to protect her.” Lana grunted, legs folded up underneath her while she struggled to stand. Mary Eunice offered her a hand and helped tug her to her feet. “Are you alright? I know you’re still tender.”

Lana bobbed her head, sweating and shivering and silent, tongue flitting out between her lips to wet them. “Tender?” Frieda echoed. “Tender from what?”

“I—I had abdominal surgery a few months ago.” Lana wiped the blood from the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand and grimaced at the sight of it.

“You didn’t think to tell me that?”

Scowling, Lana drew back, crossing her arms and shrinking, making herself a smaller target. “Yeah, next time let me *warn you* before you kick me in the stomach.” She smeared the tears off of her cheeks, leaving dusty streaks all of her face. “It’s not like escaping a murderer has a chance of severe bodily injury. I wouldn’t expect you to *guess!*” She glared back at Frieda, but she took a step back whenever she attempted to draw closer. Mary Eunice flanked her, afraid to lay a hand on her body under the watchful eyes but shadowing her every movement in the hope of providing some comfort, or at least intervening if things became violent once again.

“He cut all of the teeth out of Wendy’s jaw and put them in his mask. He kept her corpse in a freezer for weeks before he caught me. He forced me to make love to her naked body with long strips of skin pulled off and then he raped me to try to *fix* me—” Her voice broke off, shaking as hard as her body. “If you need me to spell it out for you! God forbid I should expect you to have some shred of decency! Yeah, Frieda, this is all some big gotcha—I’m gay because I *want to be a boy* and look up women’s skirts! I’m out to get attention and tear the family apart! You got me! It’s not like the whole fucking city of Boston knows who I am! It’s not like I’ve been kicked out of restaurants and churches! It’s not like Sister Mary Eunice has been assaulted just for being seen in public with me! It’s not like I can’t go to the grave of the love of my life without harassing me!” Lana’s broken gaze, half-glare, half desperate, swept over her family, and she shook her head. “For fuck’s sake.” She whirled around on her heel and stormed away from the house toward the line of wintry barren trees.

In a reverent silence, everyone watched her retreat, too astonished by the outburst to pursue. Even Mary Eunice scrambled for a moment before she had her wits about her enough to turn and chase after. Frieda caught her by the elbow. “Wait!” Mary Eunice froze, eyes wide. “Sister, please, don’t let her leave. I want to tell her I’m sorry.”
You did this to her. Some things can’t be fixed with an apology. But Mary Eunice didn’t have the strength to say this to Frieda. Frieda hadn’t done anything to Lana, not really; she’d only irritated all the holes in Lana’s soul left by a demon just as destructive but far more tangible than the one which had inhabited Mary Eunice’s body. “I’ll do my best.” Frieda released the sleeve of her sweater, and she whirled to chase after Lana into the forest, where the gray afternoon beamed faint, cool sunlight between the barren trees.

The thick layer of dead leaves upon the ground eased the task of following Lana, for her every footstep crackled, and Mary Eunice needed only pause long enough to hear the sounds of her footsteps before she took up pursuit again. Ahead, she spied the silhouette of her friend retreating, but the uneven ground made her stumble and lose her footing; Lana maneuvered the terrain with practiced ease, the way Mary Eunice prayed her rosary. God, help me. Sate Lana’s spirit. She’s hurt, and I love her. I just want her to be okay. Her eyes stung at the thought.

The huge trunks and gnarled roots gave way to a downward slope, ending with a harsh drop-off, some twenty-five feet down, where a wide creek spiraled below. “Lana?” Mary Eunice jogged along the side of the small cliff, eager to catch up, but Lana sank down to the ground, knees folded to her chest, looking over the water below. Slowing, Mary Eunice eased beside her. “Lana?” she repeated, quieter. The first sob choked from her chest, muffled behind her hand, and she hunched over, resting her chin on her knees, other arm hooked around them to keep them in place. “Lana, cupcake, it’s okay.” Mary Eunice rested her hand on Lana’s wrist, but Lana tensed, and she separated, placing her hand on the ground instead, well within reach if Lana decided she wanted it. “I’m right here,” she whispered. “I love you. I’m right here. Just let me know if you want me to touch you, okay? My hand’s right here.” The Valium is in the house. Mary Eunice swallowed hard. She doubted she could get it past Lana’s family—and if she did, she feared she wouldn’t be able to find Lana in woods again. “You’re safe. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Lana wheezed through another shudder, her chest heaving, and with flailing hands, she grabbed Mary Eunice’s hand and squeezed tight. “H-Hole—” She gasped, but Mary Eunice scooted nearer, ear tilted toward Lana to hear her better. “Hold—” Hold me. Mary Eunice wrapped both arms around Lana’s body without hesitation, cradling her close, tugging her into her lap and rocking in rhythm with Lana’s unsteady breaths. Lana clung to her by the front of her sweater and wept and whimpered until she had bled herself dry of all the days of sleepless stress and grief. “I’m s-sorry,” she stammered. Her shivers kept passing through, as steady as the wind.

“You’ve done nothing wrong.” Mary Eunice shifted, pushing Lana out of her lap to remedy the growing numbness in her legs, but she kept her arms around Lana’s waist. “Except hitting her. That wasn’t great.”

Lana snorted, a wet form of a chuckle. “You would’ve been a good mom.” She leaned over, resting her head on her shoulder, and Mary Eunice took the opportunity to tuck her greasy hair behind her ears and examine her flushed face. “I shouldn’t have shouted, either. That was stupid. I shouldn’t have said any of that dumb shit.” She shivered. Mary Eunice rubbed her back, hoping the friction would give her some heat.

“It has to come out somehow,” Mary Eunice murmured in return. “I know there are things you can’t tell me, but you shouldn’t bottle it up. You have to let it out. Write it down.”

“I thought you already knew everything.” Mary Eunice’s brows quirked. “I thought you saw it. In his head.”

Oh. Mary Eunice’s stomach sank. She had pieces, memories of memories—things the demon had seen both in Dr. Thredson’s mind and in Lana’s. “I know what I can remember,” she said, “but… I try not to think about those things. It’s not everything.” Lana found her hand and wrapped their fingers up together, out of the eye of her family for the first time since they had arrived. “I’ll listen
Lana licked her lips, eyes floating down to the swirling brown water below. “I can only think of her when I’m with you.” Mary Eunice gazed at the side of her face, watching the way it moved in the gray afternoon sunlight. “It—It makes me so cold. Even trying to remember her the way I loved her, it’s cold. I—I only feel warm when we’re in bed together. That’s the only time I know I can think of her freely, without—without remembering all the stuff I want to forget.” She cleared her hoarse throat, shaking her head. “Sometimes I wait until you fall asleep, and then I cry, just because I know I can while you’re there without having a fit.”

“You don’t have to wait until I’m asleep, Lana.”

“I know.” She glanced back to Mary Eunice, wearing a small, watery smile. “Some things I like to be private. And I can’t do it without you, so I take what I can get. I just want to think of how much I love her without remembering what her rotten tongue tasted like.” *He robbed her of her ability to grieve. He took away her mourning. How did he do that? Why did he do that?* Mary Eunice’s stomach flipped, and she swallowed to ensure she wouldn’t vomit. “I want to remember her without being disgusted, and you—being with you makes that possible.”

Mary Eunice pecked her on the cheek, a stolen kiss; she feared she wouldn’t get another until they left the home. “I’m glad I can help.”

A thumb warmed the back of Mary Eunice’s hand, rubbing it, caressing it, embracing it. “I love you.” Mary Eunice squeezed her hand tight in response. Lana surveyed the barren, wintry landscape again. “This was where we kissed for the first time. When we were seventeen. It was Easter, and our moms wanted everyone to help clean up after the egg hunt at church, but we slipped away and came here. It was warm. We just—We kissed, and then we looked at each other, and then we jumped in the water together and went swimming like nothing ever happened.”

The swirling, dark water frightened Mary Eunice from where she sat, all these feet above, but she could picture it, nevertheless: Lana and Wendy, gangly teenagers, interlocking into a kiss and then springing into the creek. The kiss drew on in her mind, their hands tangled in one another’s hair, pelvises threatening to bump against one another. Her breath hitched. She glanced sideways at Lana, hoping to ground herself, but instead, their gazes locked, and her heart nearly stopped in her chest. They both licked their lips in unison. A distinct tingle rose from the junction between Mary Eunice’s thighs. “Can I…?” Lana asked, and Mary Eunice needed no more prompting to press her lips flush against Lana’s, hot and smooth.

Footsteps crunched through the leaves. They sprang apart like magnets repelled from one another. Timothy slid down the slope. “Hey. Thought I might find you here.” He stopped above them and waiting for Lana and Mary Eunice to stand. “John just got home.”

Lana rolled her eyes. “Does he want to give me a second ass-kicking?”

“John? Hell, no. That boy’s a yankee. You could wipe the floor with him. Please, we all know you weren’t hitting back because she’s knocked up. If she weren’t, she would’ve been hogtied.” Mary Eunice narrowed her eyes. She thought she had seen Lana losing the fight—losing very badly, in her opinion. But Timothy thought otherwise, and Lana made no move to correct him. “No, I just escaped the child mania and decided I would rather spend time with my sister who doesn’t have an army of children.”

“Fair enough.”

His brown eyes softened. “Are you alright? It looked like she got a few good knocks in. I wouldn’t want a pregnant woman sitting on top of me, either.”
Lana inclined her eyebrows. “I’m fine.”

He gazed down into the swirling water below. “Huh,” he grunted, a sound of mild interest. “I haven’t been down here in years. We used to play down here all the time when we were kids.” Lana nodded in mute agreement. “Remember that time you stole Daddy’s gun and fell and broke your toe and was too scared to tell him so you just limped for weeks?”

“The toe’s still crooked.”

Timothy chuckled. “I remember that time you convinced me and Roger there were big fish down there, in the creek, and if we got close enough to the edge, we could see them from up here, and then Wendy ran out and you pushed us both in.”

“And then you pretended to be drowning so we both jumped in to save your lives.”

“Yeah. That was funny.” Timothy squinted off into the distance, across the cliff spying something in the empty trees across the lot. “Hey—Do you see that? It looks like a deer!”

The mention of an animal piqued Mary Eunice’s interest. “Where?”

“Over there!” He pointed to an exact location, very brown and overgrown with dead hedges; she could make out nothing rom the foliage. “See it?” The wind blew and the shrub twitched. “It just moved!”

Lana placed a hand on her forearm. “He’s trying to trick you so he can push—” Her sentence cut off abruptly as Timothy slammed into her from behind. Lana pitched forward, and arms outstretched, she lingered on the edge of the cliff for a precarious moment. Mary Eunice lunged to catch her a millisecond too late. She careened out of control into the empty air. Her shriek died when her body struck the water in a dull thud.

“Lana!” Mary Eunice scrambled forward, but the sandy edge of the soil threatened to give way. “Lana!” She gazed at the choppy surface of the water, seeking any hint of life, any emergent limb or bubbles floating to the top. *Nothing.* Her stomach flipped. She whirled on Timothy. “Can she swim?”

He tilted his head. “You know,” he said easily, languidly, “she could fifteen years ago, but now? I have no idea. Is that the kind of thing you forget?” *She could be drowning!* Mary Eunice ripped away from him. She stared down at the brown surface of the water, and then she kicked off her shoes. “Whoa—Sister, wait, you shouldn’t—”

She paid him no attention. *God, guide me.* Without another second’s thought, she leapt, clumsy as the teenager they had tormented ten years ago, and spiraled toward the frigid waters below, praying all the way down.
The splitting pain of striking the water vanished into numbness the instant Mary Eunice's body sank beneath the surface. The frigidity plunged daggers into her chest and stomach; out of reflex, she sucked in an astonished breath of sweet water. Bubbles spewed from her nostrils and gargled away from her. The creek ran deeper than she expected, above her head at the point where she had struck, and her feet touched the earthy bottom and kicked up mud. She sprang off of it. Pinching her eyes open in the icy water, the blurred shape of the sun filtered down to her, distant and burning dimmer than the fire in her chest.

Her head broke the surface of the creek. She hacked, fighting to bring all the water up from her lungs. "Lana!" Her cry died in a vague croak. She slurped in a deep breath. A choppy wave broke across her face. Her stiff limbs buffered, reluctant to keep churning beneath the cold water. I can't breathe! Her breath hitched, all broken in her chest. God, help me! Underfoot, she caught onto a stone of some sort, but the current shoved her off of it before she could latch on. It gave her just enough of an advantage to surge upward and scream, "Lana!" to the open air again. What if she's under the water? Mary Eunice's jaw chattered. What if I can't make it back up? Her legs already threatened to cease their churning beneath her; without her rapid sucking breaths measuring her, holding her in place, the creek's current could carry her straight into the arms of the Shachath. It's for Lana.

The next sweeping choppy wave crashed over her, and she allowed it to tug her under, forcing her eyes to remain drawn open, scouring the creek bed for any sign of a floating body. Her hair formed a cloud around her head. Through it, no forms stood out on the murky haze. Please, God, help me find Lana. Her chest squirmed, heart thrashing into a panic, and the urge to breathe threatened to overwhelm her. Eyes burning, she floundered, seeking the bottom. It had disappeared from beneath her. She whirled around, somehow paddling against the current, and it struck her so she somersaulted. A protruding branch knocked all the air out of her chest. A string of bubbles wailed from her mouth. That way, that way's up! Kicking off from the branch, she strained upward. The back of her sweater caught on the branch and held her in place. I can't breathe!

The hand of God swooped over her and scooped her out of the water, a cat forking a minnow to shore with an expert paw. Her back splatted on the stone. "Breathe!" A sharp hand swatted her cheek. "Breathe, dammit!" Mary Eunice obeyed with a shudder, as she exhaled, she hacked, and Lana pushed her upright. She doubled over at the middle and spewed. The whole world spun around. Her balance spiraled away. She tilted backward, but Lana held her in place, firm as a stone. "Goddamn that bastard! He knows better! You almost drowned! What kind of person does that? Pushes a total stranger off of a cliff?"

Mary Eunice blinked a few times. Her eyes watered, shedding the creek water from them. "He didn't push me," she croaked. Muscles seizing, she quivered, lips buffering against one another. "I jumped." The gray sunlight reflected off of the water and glared into her eyes. She shut them tight against the brightness. Lana's arms held her around the middle, and as she reclined, she imagined she could fall asleep like this—if it weren't so cold. "I thought you were druh-drowning—we
didn't see you come buh-back up—he said maybe you had fuh-fuh-forgotten how to swim." The stammer punctuated her voice on every consonant; even her tongue shivered in protest of the cold air and water.

A soft hand caressed her cheek, replacing the sharp sting where she'd slapped her before. "Goddamn him," Lana whispered. Her thin voice shivered. "If he thought I was drowning, he'd have jumped in after me. He was just trying to scare you."

The warm sensation of Lana's nose in her sodden hair sent pleasant trembles down Mary Eunice's spine. "It worked." We can't stay down here. The south Georgia air had none of the frigid bite of Boston's winter—she would've considered it a mild autumn day for Boston, pleasant enough for a skirt and a sweater with no extra coats or hats or gloves—but with their wet clothes, the breeze cut straight to their bones. Hands on the pebble-laden shore, Mary Eunice balanced away from Lana. "Do—Do you know the way out of here? Are we stuck?" She lifted her eyes to the sheer cliff-face from which she had jumped; the creek had swept her too far down the stream for her to spot Timothy on the edge of the cliff where she had left him. I hope he didn't jump after me. If he had hurt himself, they wouldn't know it—they were too far from him.

A heavy sigh fluttered from Lana's nose. "Yeah." She was pale, eyes bloodshot, as she staggered to her feet, and she offered Mary Eunice a hand, which she accepted as she stumbled upward. "Are you alright? Are you hurt?" Mary Eunice shook her head. Everything ached. Her bones stung in protest of the temperature. "Your sweater was torn—turn around, let me see." Obedient, she hobbled around, exposing the ripped back of her sweater where it had caught on the branch underwater. "You've got a scratch. It's small. It—it should be okay, I think." Lana swallowed hard, throat bobbing, and she opened an arm. "Come here, let's—let's stay close. Keep warm like that."

She had no argument against it. She folded herself under Lana's outstretched arm and hooked one around Lana's waist in turn. The sharp stones prodded her feet. Why did I take off my shoes? She didn't know what had overcome her when she leapt into the water, why she had stripped off her shoes and nothing else before she jumped after Lana. With Lana's body pressed flush against hers, she turned her head to press her face into Lana's rank tangles of drenched hair, inhaling what remained of her scent, though the fishy stink of the creek clung to both of them.

"It's shallow up here. We can wade across. There are these rocks—we can climb up the other side." The cold made Lana's voice tremble the same way both of their bodies shivered, but it didn't stop her from leading the way, tugging Mary Eunice along by the waist. We're both still alive. Thank God. She made the Sign of the Cross with her free arm, the other wrapped around Lana like she clutched a life raft, or like a monkey protectively held fast to its infant. "I'm sorry. This whole trip has been a mess. My family—they're better now, I suppose, but they're still dysfunctional."

"I don't mind." That's a lie. Mary Eunice minded very much; she loathed the way they talked to Lana, the way Frieda had spoken to her, the way Helen looked down the bridge of her nose. The mere fact any of those sweet children had the presence of mind to approach Lana and ask about her sickness infuriated Mary Eunice. But they were Lana's family, and Lana had chosen to come here, and she had chosen to support the woman she loved. She accepted her role here without conditions. And they're getting better. They love her. They're trying to change. That's all we can ask for. "This whole swimming business isn't very fun, though."

Lana chuckled, dark and wry, as she stepped off of the shore into the water. Here, the creekbed had flattened out, and the cold water only came up to her knees. "At least it's still warm here. We would've had hypothermia by now in Boston."

"We would've hit solid ice in Boston." Lana laughed, louder and freer, her drenched hair tossed
back in thick tangles. The cold had flushed her cheeks pink and made her eyes bloodshot, but her
drowned rat appearance took nothing from her smile. Mary Eunice stumbled after her into the
water. The murky bottom stirred up brown clouds under her feet. "Gross," she grumbled under
her breath.

"You poor, miserable city slicker." She stumbled and limped after Lana, struggling to keep her
footing through the biting cold which stiffened and numbed her toes. The pebbles on the opposite
shore were sharper than before; she hissed a protest as one of the stones cut into the sole of her
foot. "Hey, take it easy." Lana paused, shifting her arm from around Mary Eunice's neck. The
exposed skin tingled in the cold, and Mary Eunice resisted the urge to grab her back and replace it
like a stolen blanket. The soft hand caressed her cheek. "I really am sorry." She stood on her
tiptoes and pecked a kiss on Mary Eunice's lips, dark eyes glittering with sorrow. "And if it's any
consolation, Mama is gonna kill Timothy."

Her face warmed at the gentle kiss, yearning for another to replenish all of the hot blood to her
body, but she didn't request it. "I love you." Her vulnerable voice ached somewhere deep inside of
her, the meaning so much deeper than what Lana would perceive. Lana would never know how
she felt, what she was—a lesbian. The word was both vile and freeing to Mary Eunice, dirty and
identifying, like she had erected a shack out of mud and sticks in the wood but still called it home.

Lana's thumb trailed over her lips. Mary Eunice puckered them, kissing the pad of her fingertip,
and Lana smiled in return, rueful but genuine. "I know. I love you, too, sunshine." She placed her
arm around Mary Eunice's shoulders once more. "It's just around the corner up here." In silence,
she followed, both eyes cast down at the ground to try and dodge the worst of the pointed stones.
The gray afternoon sky shed dreary light on the two of them. Their shadows stretched, faint and
long behind them, and she lifted her gaze to the cliff face as they rounded the sharp curve,
brushing close to the dangling roots and lichen but not near enough to touch them. The soil
crumbled in heaps. None of her excursions in Briarcliff's forest had prepared her for this type of
adventure, freezing and dirty and stumbling over an unforgiving terrain. "Oh, shit."

A series of large boulders had collapsed across the creek, forming gaps for the water to flow
through but creating a large pond like a beaver's dam. Several yards up from the ground, an
overgrown trail showed where the stones had once allowed children to freely go from the
woodland above to the creek below, but with the boulders fallen across the water, they had no
access to the trail—no access back to the land above, back to the house, back to warmth. "No, no,
no…" Lana broke away from her to cross the shoreline, standing underneath the place where the
trail split. "We're trapped."

Mary Eunice limped to catch up with her. God, please... She had given so many prayers in the
last two hours, she wondered if God stopped listening after a certain amount. If there's a prayer
quota, I filled mine for today. The crumbled remains of what once supported the stack of boulders
stood a few feet off the ground, one stone resting on another. "Maybe—if I can stand on this, and
you get on my shoulders, you can pull yourself up," she suggested. She boosted herself up onto
the first wind-weathered stone and stood on it—rocky, but steady enough. The next one trembled
underfoot when she hauled herself onto it, and she balanced with her arms outstretched, like she
used a spinning chair to reach the ceiling. "See—it's—it's okay." Her breathless voice indicated
otherwise.

"That's even more dangerous than free-falling into cold water." Mary Eunice braced herself
against the dirt wall, grabbing onto a thick root. She tugged a few times, but it held firm. "What
are you going to do if I get up there? I'm not leaving you down here to freeze."

"I can wait ten minutes for you to get a rope and some help to pull me up."

Brows quirked together, Lana pursed her lips. She considered, but then she shook her head. "I
won't do it. They'll realize we're gone soon enough, and they'll come looking for us. I'm not going
to leave you down here by yourself. If that rock flips out from under you, one of us could get hurt
—and I did not come all this way to be stuck at the hospital on the day of my father's funeral."

Mary Eunice slid her bare feet over the smooth rock beneath her. "I think it's stable enough. See—that root up there, you could grab it—I really don't mind waiting." It's dark down here. Kind of
scary. She swallowed those thoughts. She wasn't afraid of waiting for a few minutes, not if it
meant they made it back to warmth faster. "Can't we try it? It might be hours before someone
realizes we've been gone too long." I've never missed our bed more than I do right now. She
missed the bed, Gus curled up down on the foot, lying in Lana's arms with the blankets all knotted
around them, the glow of snow through the windows and absolutely no risk of falling into a creek
and drowning.

Mary Eunice placed Lana under a desperate look, and with a sour twist to her lips, Lana climbed
up on the larger stone. "I don't like this." Mary Eunice stepped down from the unsteady rock to
meet her and bent over, and Lana hooked her arms around her neck, springing and hiking her legs
up.

The sudden weight made her suck in a deep breath. One arm flew back to slip under Lana's leg to
keep her from falling; the other grabbed the root in front of her so she could climb up onto the
wobbling rock, which behaved more like a bobblehead and less like a step-ladder than she
would've like. She didn't dare exhale for fear of unbalancing herself. Her bare toes curled to gain
some friction on the smooth surface, shifting her weight to counter whichever way the rock
wanted to pitch. Lana's arms strained upward for the root, but it was just out of reach. "Can I—I'm
going to try to climb you, alright? Hold on tight." Mary Eunice jerked her head in agreement; she
couldn't speak, holding her breath too tight. Lana boosted herself up on Mary Eunice's shoulders.
With a grunt, she slung a leg over her shoulder, and then the other followed suit. "I'm sorry."
Lana's skirt formed a tent around the back of Mary Eunice's neck, and every time she shifted, it
tugged her hair. But Lana swayed forward in a lopsided lunge. "Can you go to the right a little?"

I'm afraid. Mary Eunice glanced down at the rock. Would it hold her if she shuffled? She feared it
wouldn't. But she obeyed, nonetheless, feet sliding over the smooth surface of the rock, breath
hitching whenever it tipped. Lana lunged again, closer this time, and Mary Eunice held fast to the
root in front of her.

On the third grab, Lana seized the root. Gotcha! She heaved herself upward with a grunt of
victory, feet scrabbling at the soft dirt wall, gaining some hold. Almost there! One arm heaved up
onto the flat part of the trail. She hiked up one foot and caught it in the root. It worked! She was
right! It worked!

The weight vanished from Mary Eunice's shoulders. Freed from the burden, she pitched
backwards. The rock rolled underfoot, and both she and it vanished under the water. At the
splash, Lana craned her neck to see behind her. "Sister?" she called, dangling there, halfway on
land and halfway in the air. "Sister? She can swim. She's probably just disoriented. The current
can't sweep her away with all those rocks. But beneath the murky brown water, Lana could make
out no shape of her friend. It can't be that deep—eight feet, at the most! The water gave no
indication of the woman who had fallen in. "Mary Eunice!" she called again, desperately, losing
her hold on the earth to a sweaty palm.

A stream of bubbles broke the surface of the water. "Oh, shit." Lana dropped from the edge of the
forest floor back onto the shore; her knees and ankles wailed a protest, but she wasted no time in
springing into the water, eyes wrenched open in spite of the temperature. Her arms churned,
treading to keep her from floating to the surface. Another string of bubbles frothed from
somewhere below. Mary Eunice? She followed it down, a few feet, but an insurmountable
distance as her hands tangled in Mary Eunice's thick hair, clouded around her in the water. Desperate blue eyes met hers. The water carried a distorted moan. Lana wrapped her arms around her and kicked off from the creekbed, but Mary Eunice didn't come free. She's stuck on something!

Eyes burning, she swam lower, battering Mary Eunice's skirt out of the way where the rock had fallen on her foot, pinning it to creekbed. I need to breathe. Lana dug her hands into the mud, shoveling it out of the way. It floated up into her eyes. Pinching them closed, she followed the shape of Mary Eunice's foot with her hand and clawed at the earth, fighting to make enough to room to free her. Her chest burned. But if I take another breath, she could drown! She grabbed Mary Eunice by the ankle and dragged her foot. It refused to budge. I've got to move the rock. Lana shoved the stone, lifting it, pushing it, anything to try and move it just an inch, just enough for Mary Eunice to break free. Dammit, I'll drown before I let her die down here!

She groaned, and bubbles frothed from her own mouth as she lifted the rock—not much, but enough. Mary Eunice's foot floated free. Lana seized her around the waist and heaved upward. As she broke the surface, she sucked in a deep breath; droplets of water went with the sweet taste of air, but she paid them no heed. "Mary?" she gasped. "Mary Eunice?" Mary Eunice sputtered into a series of weak coughs again. She inhaled more water. God, she's going to get pneumonia. I'm going to kill Tim. Lana shoved her at the shoreline, pushing her up first, but she made no effort to pull herself to safety. "C'mon, Mary, just—just hold on." She heaved herself up onto the ground and grabbed Mary Eunice under the arms, hauling her up. Spent, she flopped onto her back, leaving Mary Eunice half-strewn over her on her stomach. "Say—Say something, please."

"I'm sorry," she croaked after a silence—brief, but all too long. The apology, so characteristic of Mary Eunice, would've made Lana laugh. "That was a bad idea." She rested her head on the upper part of Lana's stomach. Her whole body shuddered.

Lana carded her fingers through Mary Eunice's knotted hair. Her body ached and burned. "No, it wasn't. I would've made it up if the rock wouldn't have pinned you." She left her sandy palm stuck to the other woman's cheek. The thought of lifting it tired her. She wanted to lie here, cold and shivering, with Mary Eunice, and rest. But it's too cold for that. The afternoon had begun to fade into evening, and the shifting temperatures would soon reflect it. If we can't get out, we need to find shelter. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?" Her hand slid down to Mary Eunice's throat, the lowest point she could reach where the other woman rested; Mary Eunice hadn't had the strength to completely beach herself and lay with her feet still dangling in the frigid water. "Here—get your feet out of the water. You could get frostbite." Shoving herself up onto her elbows, Lana grabbed Mary Eunice under the arms and tugged, but the adrenaline had faded, and Mary Eunice didn't budge. "You've got to get up. C'mon. Sister, c'mon!"

At the prompting, Mary Eunice hauled herself across the shoreline on her hands, barely lifting her belly off of the ground; her hair hung in miserable mats. "What do we do now?" The muscles in her arms shivered with the effort of supporting her own weight. "Lana?" Round blue eyes fixed on her, bloodshot from the water stinging them—the same eyes which had found her just moments ago and pleaded for rescue. She trusts me. Lana's heart sank. The quiet utterance of her own name burned inside of her, the implications tied to it which shared the faith Mary Eunice had in her. Even now, even here, she trusted Lana to guide her out of this mess. Oh, god, this isn't fair. I can't keep lying to her. I've got to tell her.

The epiphany writhed inside of her intestines. Tell her? I can't do that! They were a thousand miles away from home. Mary Eunice had nowhere to go to get away from her. If the revelation hurt her, made her uncomfortable, frightened her, she couldn't escape; she had nowhere to go to mourn her broken faith and no one to approach for comfort. It isn't fair to tell her. But it isn't fair
to keep it from her, either. She licked her lips as she pushed herself up into a sitting position. The pebbles ground through her skirt against her ass. "We—We just have to get low and keep warm until somebody comes to find us." Mary Eunice knew nothing of deceit; she would never suspect it from her closest friend. *I'm betraying her. I can't let it go any farther.* Her desperation to keep it secret was borne out of selfishness, her own desire to keep Mary Eunice close to her. *She isn't mine. God, this is going to hurt her. I'm such a fool.* Lana's stomach turned. She reached out one sandy hand to tangle with Mary Eunice's, and bracing against one another, they stumbled to their feet, both shivering and weak. The wind buffeted through the ravine and shed through their clothes.

"There's—There's a little nook over there," Mary Eunice mumbled, nodding to a crevice in the dirt wall under the lichen. She smeared a streak of saliva from the corner of her lips where it fell out; her mouth had already grown pale and gained a purplish tint. Dark red marks marred the top of her foot, and she favored it, reluctant to put too much weight on it. *And she's hurt.* Lana placed her arm around her waist. "I'm okay."

"Let me help you." *She's going to be sore. She had to strain herself, trying to do those gymnastics on that rock.* "Do you think it's broken?"

Mary Eunice shook her head, numb lips favoring silence. Creek water ran down her face. It trickled, likewise, down Lana's bra between her breasts and over her thighs; the cold had invaded their whole bodies, and as they nestled in the cranny of the dirt wall, they pressed close together, seeking to conserve warmth. Mary Eunice sagged in exhaustion. *She hasn't slept.* She rested her head on Lana's shoulder. A quiet groan passed from her lips. *I've worn her out. She's past her limit.* Fumbling, Mary Eunice folded her legs beneath her to try and warm her chilled feet, and she wrapped up her hands in Lana's. Her hair draped over her in a miserable drenched tangle. Her eyelashes brushed Lana's cheek as her eyes drowsed.

*She can't fall asleep. It's too cold.* Lana kissed her temple. "Wake up, sunshine." Bleary eyes sought hers from below. "Did you hit your head?"

Blinking once, the question dawned over Mary Eunice's face slowly, like honey running out of the jar at its natural, viscous pace. "No." She shook her head, but she didn't lift it from Lana's shoulder. "I'm just tired. And—I like being so close to you. It's comforting."

Lana chuckled to disguise the chipping off of her heart. "We're freezing our asses off out here a thousand miles away from home. Are you sure this is your definition of comfy?"

A sleepy smile crawled upon Mary Eunice's face. "Maybe not comfy, but…" She shrugged. "Maybe I'm just tired." She rolled all of her fingers into Lana's, pressing them together with all of the strength in her weakened body, and she nuzzled her cold nose against Lana's cheek, requesting a kiss. Lana pecked her on the lips. "Thank you for saving me."

"You don't have to thank me for that." Mary Eunice hummed, head relaxing again, but Lana shouldered her. "Wake up. C'mon, sit up. You can't fall asleep. You'll get hypothermia or frostbite or something." Reluctantly, Mary Eunice straightened, tilting her head back against the wall. "Tell me something. Tell me a story. Tell me what you got me for Christmas."

"I'm not telling you what I got you for Christmas."

"We're not going to be home for Christmas anyway," Lana bargained. "I'll tell you what I got you, too." Mary Eunice shook her head, obstinate. Lana sucked on her lower lip. "I could just tell you one thing I got you, then, so there's still a surprise, if that's what's important to you. You know, some rich families have a tradition where they have so many presents they open one on Christmas Eve instead of opening everything Christmas morning—it would be like that."
"It's not Christmas Eve yet. That's tomorrow."

"So you'll tell me tomorrow?"

"I didn't say that." Mary Eunice squeezed her hand. "Christmas is about love. Telling you what I got you is like—like leaving milk out to get warm and then giving it to you to drink. It's not as good if it's not a genuine surprise."

Lana chuckled, rolling her eyes, but Mary Eunice narrowed her eyes at her. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh. You've got funny ideas of Christmas." She never got a real Christmas. Briarcliff ruined her. Let her have her weird ideals for the perfect Christmas. "I promise that you don't love me less if you tell me what you got me, though. Swear it on my own name." Lana took Mary Eunice's hand in both of hers and rubbed the back of it with one thumb, the palm with another, admiring the way the sinew within her hand moved whenever she bent her fingers, the way the veins shifted against her touch. "Your callouses are softer now." She massaged the heel of Mary Eunice's hand, the place on her palm which had hardened from overuse at Briarcliff's bakery. Her words were quiet, almost thoughtless, as she worked her fingers over Mary Eunice's knuckles, admiring the spidery, elegant fingers in her grasp. "You have such pretty hands."

A cheek rested on her shoulder again, this time with eyes fixed down on where their hands interacted. The cold had flushed her cheeks so pink, Lana couldn't tell if she blushed or not. "Thank you." She folded her fingers down into a loose fist, and Lana studied the way her bones shifted with the movement. "Aunt Celest never liked them," she admitted, voice low; the day had worn her too thin for her manage more than a whisper. "She said they were like a man's hands."

"No..." Lana shook her head. "They're not. They're very pretty. A pianist's hands." She examined them in the fading light. The overcast sky muted the sunset. "You've got elegant hands. I like them very much." Mary Eunice's eyes glinted in the gray light, fixed on Lana's face while Lana studied the limbs in her grasp. "Your Aunt Celest was wrong about a lot of things. I hope you know that now. She made you feel small. You're not small. You're wonderful." She glanced back to Mary Eunice. In the early evening light, the blue of her eyes became a midnight color, and the water reflected in them like a million stars glistening on the surface, as vast and expansive as the universe. God lies in her eyes. "And nothing about you is like a man. Nothing. You're a woman. A perfect woman." I want to kiss her. Lana squashed down the indulgent urge. She had no right to place her lips on Mary Eunice's body now, anywhere upon her skin. "I'm sorry." I'm sorry for what I've done. "You only wanted to go to mass for Christmas, and... well, now we're stuck here with my dumb family."

"I don't mind. I'm with you. That's what I really want." Lana's chest ached with a certain desperation at Mary Eunice's quiet words. She had found the best friend she could have ever imagined, and she had fucked it up—royally. She became a predator beside a woman she loved, her eyes attracted to all the wrong places. She has given me all of herself, and I fell in love with her. I abused her trust. "I really just said that thing about peace on earth and mass so you would stop asking me what I wanted. I took a vow of poverty. I'm not allowed to want things. Personal gifts are technically against church policy."

"Oh." Everything I got was church related. She's allowed to have those things. I think. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings. You wanted to celebrate Christmas. And..." She averted her eyes. "It's been so long since anyone cared enough to even ask me what I wanted. I thought it wouldn't hurt to indulge both of us." She stared down at the pebbles strewn underneath them; with her unoccupied hand, she pushed them around, the colors hardly discernible in the shadows. "I told myself for a long time that I didn't need other people to care about me if God did. And I do
believe that God loves me, and that makes me special and important, but—it's not the same as being loved by a person, by you. I didn't realize how much I missed out on, until you loved me, and I loved you. And I love God more for it, that He brought me to you, so I could feel how wonderful it is to love you and be loved by you…" Lana's face screwed up. Oh, god. This hurts. Her hand squeezed Mary Eunice's, drawing her attention. "Lana? Is something the matter? Are you hurt?"

Lana shook her head. "No—I'm fine." Her chest ached. A heavy lump had formed in her throat and refused to sink down to the bottom when she gulped around it. It was so easy with Wendy; they were frustrated, and they were angry, and they had hot, mad sex and woke up the next morning as girlfriends. This conversation was never something she had practiced, and while she had loved women her whole life, she had never before had to look a woman in the eyes and tell her she loved her in the way she shouldn't love her—romantically, sexually, lustfully. "I need to tell you something." It escaped in a tight breath.

"What's wrong?" Mary Eunice's voice shook, and she sat up, scouring Lana for some injury; her hand ripped away, instead touching her face and cupping her cheeks, sliding down her neck. "Are you sick? Are—"

Planting a finger against Mary Eunice's lips, Lana shook her head. "No, just let me talk, please. Please." Mary Eunice bobbed her head in agreement. She wrapped her hand around Lana's wrist and grasped it, their skins lingering against one another. She's so cold. What if she doesn't want to touch me anymore? What if she freezes to death because she won't touch me? "I haven't been honest with you about my feelings." Mary Eunice's eyes widened; her breath hitched in her chest, and her hand gripped Lana's tighter, like she feared she would slip away. I'm not going anywhere. But I'm worried you will. "I love you." She swallowed hard. To have drunk so much water when she fell in the creek, her mouth had dried.

Mary Eunice pursed her lips. "I love you, too, Lana, more than anything else. I mean it."

Lana shook her head. "No, no, you don't understand." She detached her tongue from the roof of her mouth where it had adhered. "I love you in a way I'm not supposed to love you, because you're my friend—and I want you to know that's all I want from you, is to be your friend, and if you don't want that, it's okay, I understand. But I love you the same way I—I loved Wendy."

Lana paused, but Mary Eunice didn't move, frozen in shock with her eyes locked on Lana's face and lips slightly parted. "I'm sorry I was dishonest. I wanted to protect you, and I know it was wrong, I just—" Her throat closed around her words, and she shut her eyes. This is a stupid reason to cry and I'm not going to do it. I am not going to cry over unrequited love like a dumb teenager.

"Lana, I…" Lana started to tug her hand away, but Mary Eunice held fast. The harder Lana pulled away, the tighter Mary Eunice grasped. "Stop it! I—I—Me too!" The words paralyzed all of her nerve endings in her brain telling her to get away and protect Mary Eunice from herself. The evening light reflected in two small tears on Mary Eunice's cheeks. "I—I love you, too. That way. The way I'm not supposed to." She gulped aloud.

Her brain sputtered like the motor of an old car. "But you're not…" She forgot both the word lesbian and the word gay simultaneously, so she replaced them with, "You're not like me."

Mary Eunice blinked and freed more tears. "I am. I didn't know it until I was your friend, but I am. I—I love you." She tugged a hand away from Lana just to wipe her cheeks, but Lana took the freedom to smear away the tears herself. Mary Eunice's shoulders and chest seized in a heavy hitched breath. "I couldn't tell anyone—I must've confessed to it half a dozen times by now, I just can't stop—" Her words closed in a sob. "Please don't hate me."
"Sh, sh, sh…" The tears kickstarted Lana's frozen brain. "I would never hate you." She scooped Mary Eunice around the waist and scooted her into her lap, tired arms and legs bemoaning the shift. Mary Eunice clapped both arms around her neck and bawled into its crook. Where have I been? Why has she been carrying this alone? Lana shut her eyes tight. "You know I would never hate you. Especially not for this." I know what this feels like. But she had someone to share it with—three someones. Mary Eunice walked a lonely and confused path. "There's nothing wrong with it, sunshine." She's exhausted. This isn't fair. Lana rocked her back and forth like a distressed child.

The sky faded into late evening, and the air cooled. Their wet clothing began to stiffen as the water froze. Mary Eunice finally hiccuped into silence, fighting to regulate her breathing. "I'm sorry," she whispered, "I didn't mean it to happen. But I told Lois and she said you—you felt the same, and I didn't think it was possible but I couldn't stop thinking about it, about you, and you're my only friend and I didn't want to lose you—" She choked and swallowed the last words.

"You won't lose me," Lana reassured. "I'm not going anywhere." She paused. Lois. "You told Lois?" Mary Eunice hummed a vague agreement. "I told Lois, too." One incredulous eye opened to meet her. "I—Goddamn, I thought she was acting really weird. She was trying to get me to figure it out." All of the muted emotions, the hidden glances, the desperate looks—Lois was trying to communicate with her without betraying Mary Eunice's trust. That was the secret she was keeping, what she wouldn't tell me. "Well, we'll have to tell her she doesn't have to keep our secrets anymore."

Mary Eunice bobbed her head. "Does this change anything?" she croaked, sprawled lazily across Lana, unable to find the strength to remove herself. It's warmer this way, Lana soothed herself, smothered by a human blanket. "Between us."

"No—not if you don't want it to. Things can be just the same way they were before if you prefer that way. Nothing has to change. We can be friends. We're friends first." Lana glanced down to hold Mary Eunice's gaze, hoping to see some indication of what she wanted lying there in her tired, broken eyes. "It only changes if you want it to."

"What do you want?"

The question caught Lana off-guard. What did she want? She had wanted to escape this conversation unscathed into silence, fighting to regulate her breathing. I already had my happily ever after. "I—I don't know," she admitted. She rubbed circles through the drenched sweater on Mary Eunice's back. "I want you to feel comfortable, first. That's what I want most."

"I am comfortable, Lana." Mary Eunice held her gaze. "I feel safe with you. And I want to be yours—in whatever way you want me. I love you."

A tired smile creased over Lana's mouth. She smoothed down the wrinkles in Mary Eunice's sweater and took a hand to her cheek. "I love you, too." Mary Eunice returned to the soft look. But I still love Wendy, too. Was she ready for another relationship? So soon? The guilt prickled inside of her. "Do you… Would you like to be my girlfriend? Or is that too much?"

The crinkles around Mary Eunice's eyes relaxed. "I would love that." She paused, and her smile fell away into a tentative frown. She considered a long moment. She's thinking about her vows. Lana remained silent. She knew she had no place to remark upon Mary Eunice's faith. But she brightened once more, dirty hair and sodden clothing taking nothing from her. "I would love it very much."

"Then—Then we can do that." Lana traced her cheekbone with her thumb. "Promise me
"something?" Mary Eunice nodded. "Promise me you won't torment yourself over this. I don't want to do this if you think God will hate you for it."

"God doesn't hate anyone." Lana narrowed her eyes, stern in her look, and Mary Eunice cleared her throat. "I—I don't know what God is trying to tell me. I feel like He is putting me on a different path. I have ever since I met you. And I feel like this might be the path He wants me to take, with you. But I don't know if I'm confusing what I want with what God needs."

"Would God give you wants if He didn't intend you to follow them?"

Mary Eunice held her gaze, eyes glittered. "Satan tempts us. But you're not like that. I could never think of you as a temptation. You're—You're the best thing to ever happen to me." She kissed the underside of Lana's chin, the most she could reach without sitting up. "Are you sure it's what you want?" she asked, her warm breath wafting against Lana's mouth and illustrating the very temptation Mary Eunice described; Lana wanted to bow her head and taste the hot steam in her breath. "I don't want you to feel guilty, either."

A rueful smile touched Lana's face. "I don't think I'm ever going to stop feeling guilty." With the admission, she averted her eyes, but she kept combing her hands through Mary Eunice's hair, hoping to dry it if she spread the strands apart enough. "You make me happy. You've taught me more about forgiving myself than I ever could've learned alone." The self-inflicted torment went nowhere with Mary Eunice, who would never hear her begrudge herself and leave her with the guilt upon her soul. "I want to be with you. And I know if things get bad for me, you'll still be there, because that's—that's just how you are. What if God takes her away? Lana's heart sank. She would never, could never, ask Mary Eunice to leave her position in the church, and if the Monsignor resurfaced and requested her return, she would certainly interpret it as the reappearance of God in her life. Don't think about that. Worry about right now. "I love you." The words had never come from her quite as easily as they came from Mary Eunice; she found them harder to say, as often as she said them. But now, she could find no hindrance on her tongue.

Mary Eunice's eyes held all the stars in their reflection, and she whispered, "I love you, too," and nuzzled upward for Lana to kiss her, needy and pleading and soft. Lana planted a soft kiss upon her lips, but Mary Eunice straightened in Lana's lap and arched her back, mouth refusing to relinquish hers with ease. Their lips tangled like their hands, fingers seeking reprieve, this time their tongues searching for some shelter in one another's mouths. Delicate hands combed into Lana's hair, while Lana's planted on Mary Eunice's waist, hesitant to begin a roaming journey across her torso. The sweater clung to her. Cold water dribbled from it. Every time Lana pushed it against her skin, she hitched a tight breath with shock.

The hands in her hair tugged her down, away from Mary Eunice's mouth and toward her jaw, and Lana complied without complaint, wrapping her lips around the sinew of Mary Eunice's neck. I don't have to stop this time. Her heart fluttered at the thought. She had done this so many times with a hand on her own reins, choking herself on the bit, forcing herself to remember her role as a friend and the abuse to which she subjected Mary Eunice with her dishonesty. She wants it this time. I can give it to her this time. A gasp fluttered from Mary Eunice's parted pink lips. Encouraged by her short fingernails scraping her scalp, Lana's hands boldened and slipped underneath Mary Eunice's sodden sweater.

She pressed her palms to Mary Eunice's cool, wet skin and explored the soft parts of her barrenness, the places she had seen in passing but had never touched. Her fingers sank into the tender part of her stomach until Mary Eunice choked on a ticklish giggle, and Lana lifted her mouth from the other woman's lips just long enough to press a teasing kiss upon her lips. Her hands curled all over her abdomen and the smooth expanses of her back onto her ribs, where she caught onto the rough fabric of a worn brassiere with a protruding underwire. This is going
straight to the garbage when we get home. Lana's eyes darted up to Mary Eunice's, seeking some approval, and Mary Eunice lifted her arms for Lana to tug the sodden sweater off of her.

Goosebumps freckled all over Mary Eunice's exposed arms. A shiver passed through her slender body, clutched between Lana's hands; in the cups of her stained bra, her nipples pebbled, visible through the fabric. "It's cold." A blush coated her face and neck, but when Lana pushed her face into the crook of Mary Eunice's neck, the other woman wrapped her arms around her, fixing her in place. Lana sucked on the little hollow of skin where Mary Eunice's collarbone met her neck. Heat flooded her groin in spite of the frigid temperature, and her lower abdomen swelled with arousal. Her hands pushed Mary Eunice out of her lap and onto the pebble-laden shore, pushing her back onto the cool earth and burying her face in the clothed bosom, lips and teeth cradling the crease between her breasts.

Mary Eunice's body struck the ground bare, and she shuddered. Her fluid movement sputtered until her whole body stiffened. Hands tearing away from Lana, she dug her fingers into the pebbles. Her legs clapped together and fixed there. "Stop—" She choked out the single syllable, whole body arching away from Lana's mouth. Her hands fought to keep the cups squashed over her breasts. "Lana, stop, please—" She took a desperate gasp for breath. "My vows—"

It took Lana a moment to process the words, the skin flinching away from hers, the body going rigid beneath all of her gentle touches, but she severed upon request, tugging herself back away from Mary Eunice. Mary Eunice bounced back up and snatched up her sweater from where Lana had discarded it, clutching it close to herself, shivering from head to toe as she covered her exposed skin with the sodden garment. "Hey—Hey, it's okay." Lana scooted nearer to her. You scared her. She isn't ready for this. She isn't like you. "Let me hook your bra."

Lana made the two hooks clasp together with a faint snap. She pressed a delicate kiss to Mary Eunice's shoulder. "Can I have this?" she asked, taking the sweater from Mary Eunice. She shook it out and slipped it back over her shoulders. "There. It's okay. I didn't mean to frighten you." That was too fast. It's too fast for you, too. You don't want that. You don't want to have a panic attack down here of all places. "Are you okay?"

Bobbing her head, Mary Eunice shifted nearer to Lana; Lana took the invitation to open her arms and invite the other for a warm hug, and Mary Eunice welcomed it. "It wasn't you." She swallowed hard, cinching her own arms behind Lana's back. "I don't like to be like that, on my back… It makes me feel trapped." She inhaled Lana's warm breath. "And my vows, I can't, I'm not allowed, I—making love is—" Her cheeks flushed pink, and she stopped babbling.

"I understand."

Meeker, she asked, "Is that a problem? I—I don't want to deprive you—"

"No, it isn't a problem." Lana kissed her forehead. "I'm a grown woman. I can take care of myself." Mary Eunice's eyes narrowed, lips pursing in concern. She doesn't know what that means. "Don't worry about it," Lana soothed. "I'm fine. Your boundaries are most important."

"But—maybe not ever, I might not be able to…"

"That's fine." Lana cradled her cheek in one hand and brushed her hair back out of her eyes. "I promise. I understand. Your faith is important to you. I could never ask you to change, even if I wanted to. It's part of who you are. It's part of you, and I love you, and so I love it, too. I'm fine with whatever you're willing to give me." Big blue eyes wandered up to her, and Lana said, "Don't you dare ask if I'm sure."
Mary Eunice giggled. She shifted out of their hug, turning her back to the wind and the darkening sky so she blocked Lana in the crevice, shielding her from the cold as much as possible. "You always know what I'm going to say." She blinked a few times. The sky had cast everything in long gray shadows, darkness swallowing the land and the crickets whirring a creepy tune. Shuffling beside Lana, she nestled their bodies together. "It's so cold," she mumbled as a quiet afterthought, resting her head on Lana's shoulder, and Lana tilted her head to press their faces together. "They have to have noticed we're gone by now, haven't they?"

Lana found one of Mary Eunice's hands resting on her thigh and grabbed it, rubbing it. *Her fingers are so cold.* Her own jaw had begun to shiver, threatening to bite her tongue where it chattered. The vanishing sunlight leached the earth of its last shreds of warmth, and the temperature plummeted accordingly. "I'm sure they have." She twisted a little, trying to put an arm around Mary Eunice's shoulders. "Don't sit like that. You're taking all the wind. You'll freeze."

"I'm fine." Mary Eunice curled up tighter. "I'm alright." Their breaths formed steamy clouds in the air in front of them, illuminated only by the sliver of the moon high above in the black sky. The stars provided no light at all, far too distant to do anything but twinkle. "We can switch in a few minutes." She kissed the corner of Lana's lips, imprecise and crooked in the dark.

Resting her head against Mary Eunice, Lana nodded, too tired to disagree; her whole body ached and shivered, and part of her regretted they hadn't kept going with their romance just to give one another some semblance of warmth absent of the sheer exhaustion filling both of them to their very bones. "No shenanigans in front of my family," she thought to mumble. "My mama will still kill you if she thinks anything is going on…"

"Mhm," Mary Eunice agreed vaguely.

*She sounds tired. We need to wake up. We need to keep talking.* Lana closed her eyes, fighting to find a good subject of conversation in her mind, searching for anything which would occupy their interest until someone came to find them. Mary Eunice's chilled body trembled against hers through their clothing; she longed to strip it away and press their bare skins against one another, savor what warmth they could from one another's bodies instead of the wet clothes leaching it from them. *Can't say that. If Mama finds us naked, she'll murder us.* Lana's spine tingled at the word. *What would Daddy think? Was he just sorry because of Wendy? He told me to take care of her, but he didn't know she liked me, too. He said he thought she did. He was just saying something. It's not like I'll ever know.* Her eyes stung. She had lost her father, but in spite of the many tears she had shed today, none of them had been for him. *I mourned him long ago.*

The fight with Frieda was borne of grief, so many types of grief she couldn't express. *That is good enough.* And much as she hated the prospect, she knew she would weep at the funeral tomorrow. *A funeral on Christmas Eve. It's short notice. Will anyone show up? How many people from her past would she have to face? How many knew why she had left? How many knew what had happened to her? All questions she wished she could ask, now that they were occurring to her, but she had no way to reach out to her mother from down here in the creek bed. *I spent too much time hating her and fearing her to ask the simple questions.*

Her mind wandered until she drifted off, still mulling on her mother. It was warm, clutched to Mary Eunice like this—as warm as it could be, all of the wind blocked, the other woman's steamy breaths fanning over her face to inhale, shared body heat flushing between them like using a single flame to ignite a million candles, an exchange with nothing lost. Mary Eunice shivered against her like a dead leaf clinging to a tree branch. *We need to switch places…* She thought nothing more.

"Lana!" The sharp cry of her name jerked her back into wakefulness. The scene hadn't changed,
moon higher in the sky but stars shedding nothing down on them. "Lana! Sister Mary Eunice!" Somewhere above, someone beckoned them, shouted their names with a desperate, reckless abandon. "Lana! Sister Mary Eunice!"

Bewilderment shattered into clarity. Sister Mary Eunice. Lana sat bolt upright. Mary Eunice's cold body slumped against her, arms still wrapping her up tight, protecting her as much as possible, giving her all of her body heat. "Mary Eunice," Lana grabbed her by the shoulders. "Sister." She shook her. "Sister. Sister, wake up!" Grappling unhindered for Mary Eunice's body, she caught a fistful of hair, all of the water frozen into stiff frost. Oh, shit. Her stomach flipped and squelched. She gagged and swallowed the bile which filled her throat, twisting her face with horror. "Oh my god, wake up!" She grabbed Mary Eunice by the throat, clawing for a pulse. I wasn't asleep that long! It can't have been that long! Oh, god!

Eyelashes fluttered against the palm of her hand. "Ow..." Mary Eunice turned her head away from where Lana pulled her hair. "L-Lana?" Her faint voice shivered on the air like a breeze. "You're... You're hurting me..."

"Sit up." Lana pushed her up. "Give me your hands. Give me your hands." Mary Eunice slumped back against her like a slug. Lana seized her hands and rubbed them between her own, trying to restore the warmth to the frigid fingers. "Stay awake. Listen to me. Are you awake?"

"Yes..." Mary Eunice shuddered. "That hurts." Lana mumbled an apology, but she didn't stop chafing the other's hands, trying to grant them whatever heat friction could generate. "It's so cold..." She curled her legs up beneath her. "Are you alright? You fell asleep..." Her sentences kept drifting off in various directions, trailing along with her faint voice and vanishing whenever she ran out of air. "I was afraid you'd get cold... Didn't wanna wake you up..."

Throat closing around her words, Lana nodded, but she knew Mary Eunice couldn't see her in the darkness. "I—I'm fine, I'm fine—oh my god, you're so cold..." Tears blossomed in her eyes. I thought I was holding another corpse, she wanted to say, but she squashed the dark thought before it reached her tongue. "Why did you do that? Why didn't you wake me up? You could've frozen to death!" Her irrational anger reached the surface instead, something to lash out of her at the shock. Her words strangled off into a sob.

Mary Eunice turned her head where she was propped up weakly against Lana. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I just wanted to keep you warm." She shuddered. "I'm so tired, Lana..."

"Don't you dare go to sleep!" Lana tugged her closer. "Oh my god." She buried her face into the crook of Mary Eunice's neck, tears beginning to fall from her eyes. "I—I heard them, they're up there, I heard them. They're looking for us. Just stay awake a little longer and they'll get us out of here."

Overhead, the calls of their names rang through again, and like a desperate, lost lamb, Lana bleated, "We're down here!" with all of the strength and air her lungs could manage. "We're down here! We're in the creekbed!"

Above, Roger said, "I heard her! I heard Lana!" and a stream of footsteps followed the voice. A flashlight beamed down onto the water in front of them, just out of reach. "Oh, fuck, Tim, look at the stones—they've all fallen down in the creek. That's why they couldn't climb out." Beside him, Timothy cursed, and Roger called again, "Lana? Where are you? Call me again!"

"We're right below you!" Lana cupped Mary Eunice's cheek, her palm warming each time she exhaled. "Sister Mary Eunice is hypothermic—please, hurry!" She buried her nose into Mary Eunice's hair and inhaled, long and deep. In a low whisper, she murmured, "It's okay, it's okay, you're going to be okay," uncertain if she spoke more to Mary Eunice or to herself. "I love you so
"Love you, too…" Mary Eunice's body quaked. "My body hurts," she mumbled in a thick slur. "Everything hurts…" She hiccuped, unable to take a deep breath.

Roger shouted back down to them. "Timothy is running to get a rope. We're going to pull you up. Is she awake?" He hadn't yet found them with the beam of the flashlight, still scanning the black surface of the water, which had formed a glassy texture of thin ice on the top.

"Y-Yes, she's awake." Lana collected Mary Eunice in her arms, trying to keep her from touching the cold earth and protect her in her own lap. "Her hair is frozen, oh my god."

"Roger?" Frieda's voice echoed through the trees. "Where are you? Did you find them? We searched the whole bank, there's nothing!"

"They're over here! The rocks collapsed! Timothy's running to get a rope so we can get them out."

"Are they alright?" Mama. Lana's heart stopped at the sound of her mother's voice, trembling and breathless like she had just run through the forest to reach them. "Are they hurt? They're liable to be half froze to death out here, in wet clothes, if they ain't half-drowned!" She tutted, and then she called, "Lana?"

*I'm here.* Her priority of keeping Mary Eunice awake and talking faded with trying to occupy them, so instead, she wrapped up the other's hand in her own and squeezed it once. Mary Eunice reciprocated with a weak squeeze of her own. Her frigid digits nearly refused to bend. "I'm okay, Mama, but Sister Mary Eunice…" Breath hitching, she found herself unable to continue, shaking her head. "I'm scared," she admitted in a smaller, softer voice, not intending anyone above to hear her.

Helen did, though—or maybe she didn't; maybe she heard the tears in Lana's voice and her nurturing spirit returned to its former glory. "It's gonna be okay, baby. You just hold her real tight, and we'll have y'all outta there fast. We'll get you both inside in front of the fire soon."

Lana kissed Mary Eunice's stiff, frozen hair. Mary Eunice whispered, "I'm okay…" and Lana formed a watery, pathetic smile at her pathetic attempt to provide comfort and assuage Lana's fears. "Sweetheart, don't wor…" She didn't finish her word. Sweetheart. When had she become sweetheart? *I don't feel very sweet right now.* Lana muffled another sob by mashing her mouth against Mary Eunice's shoulder to keep her lips shut.

Footsteps striking the earth raced back toward them. A rope dropped a few feet away from them. "I—I don't think she's able to hold onto that!" Lana shouted up to them. If Mary Eunice lost her grip, she could be hurt. "I'm going to have to tie it around her." Lana shifted and kissed Mary Eunice on the temple before she slid out from under her and reached for the heavy rope. "Can you shine the flashlight down here? I—I can't really see—"

Roger scanned the area a few times with the beam before he landed on them and held the bright, white light steady. "Tie it tight. We can't have her falling."

Mary Eunice clumsily pawed at the air, trying to shield her face from the flashlight. Lana looped the rope around her middle. "It's got to be tight," she whispered. "Just long enough for them to pull you up, okay? Then they'll take you back inside and put you in front of the fire and make you warm again." Mary Eunice's pale eyes glanced up at her, and more than anything, she longed to plant another comforting kiss on her forehead, but she knew her family watched from above. She cinched the rope around Mary Eunice's middle and knotted it twice so it wouldn't slip free. "Grab right here," she said, placing Mary Eunice's hands on the rope. "Grab and squeeze, so you won't
flip over backward, do you understand?"

"Mhm." Mary Eunice squeezed the rope tight.

"Don't let go until you get to the top." Mary Eunice grunted a second agreement, and Lana backed away. The rope pulled taut, and Mary Eunice lifted off of the ground, dangling precariously in the air as a black silhouette against the sky. Once, she began to tip backward, but she caught the rope in a clumsy grab and managed to remain upright. At the crest of the forest floor, four shapes met her, all bending over to drag her away from the dangerous cliff edge and free her from the rope.

Mary Eunice vanished from view. "Frieda, Mama, can you—can you try to warm her up? Hug her or something," Roger said, a slight stammer to his voice; apparently his job in the police department had not prepared him to order his own mother in first aid. Policing in this area is easy. Southern folks sort out their problems without cops. "Yeah, like that. We'll get those wet clothes off of her in the house. Heads up, Lana!" The rope fell back to the earth beside her with a dull thump on the shoreline. "Try to tie it like you did to her! I don't want you to fall!"

Gathering up the rope, she twisted it around her waist and dragged it into a tight knot, like a belt pulled into the wrong hole so she couldn't breathe for its tension. She doubled the knot and grabbed the rope in both hands. "I've got it!" she shouted up to him. A cold breeze rattled down the creek; the water rippled, lapping up against her ankles in short waves. The rope tugged taut. Lana sucked in a deep breath as they heaved her up. Her feet floated above the ground, first a few inches, then a foot, then more. The rope pinched into her sides so she could barely breathe, and she extended her legs to bounce off of the dirt wall, the cliff face which had trapped them. As her head breached the forest floor, she latched onto a protruding root and dragged herself up. Roger met her halfway and hauled her under the arms up onto the ground. His meaty body exhaled warmth, so in spite of the hard texture of his muscles and the manly musk attached to his breath, she buried herself into his arms. "How long were we down there?" she whispered, eyes half-closed, gasping for breath.

He pawed her wet hair out of her eyes. "A few hours. God, you're so cold." She shivered against him, reluctant to leave the embrace, but he tugged her up to her feet. "C'mon, we've got to get you both inside."

Frieda grabbed her around the waist and wrapped her in a tight hug, batting Roger away until he conceded defeat. "Lana? I'm so sorry! Are you alright? Are you hurt?" Lana shook her head, bleariness befuddling her mind. Mary Eunice. In the darkness, she could see Mary Eunice's outline, all hunched over in her mother's lap, a quivering mess. Timothy shifted somewhere beyond, but as he approached, Frieda whirled around. Like the sound of lightning striking the ground, her fist collided with his jaw. "What the fuck is your problem?" she shrieked. He staggered back away from her, clutching his face, eyes bugged out at her outburst. "How old are you? Pushing my sister off of a cliff into the creek in the middle of winter!"

Timothy held up his hands in self-defense. "I thought you were mad at her!"

"I was, and now I'm mad at you!"

The jumbled limbs of Helen and Mary Eunice began to rise, but Mary Eunice dipped and swooned, and Helen couldn't hold her upright. "Careful," Lana warned, "she's got a hurt foot…" She wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. "Don't let her fall."

Roger grabbed Mary Eunice under the arms. "I've got you—I've got her." Her rubbery legs dipped underneath her again, and he grimaced before he scooped her up bridal style. Mary Eunice whimpered in protest. "It's okay. You can't walk. I'm just taking you back inside."
She mewled in a thin voice, "Lana?" and big blue eyes peered over his shoulder, scanning the dark world with fearful wonder, twisting at all the horrors which these trees could hold. "Lana?" she repeated. Her eyelashes buffered. "She's—She's still down there—" she whispered up to Roger, unable to fight against him with her weak hands bumping against his muscular chest.

Lana shouldered past Frieda. She blinked the fuzziness out of her eyes, all gray at the edges of her vision. Don't. Focus. She gulped the dryness in her throat. "I'm right here, Sister." I don't want to call her Sister. I want to call her sunshine. But she had so many eyes on her, so many judgmental gazes, and she refused to jeopardize them now, when they needed her family more than ever. "I'm alright. I'm just fine. Don't worry about me." The dizziness folded her knees, but Frieda slipped under one of her arms, supporting her so she didn't topple over. Her mother flanked her before copying Frieda. Each of their bodies held more warmth than Lana remembered. She sank between them with a broken gasp. "Let him take you inside."

Another meek mewl rose from Mary Eunice, but Roger considered her no longer, whirling to storm out of the forest with her draped in his arms like a sack of potatoes. Timothy pushed between them. "Lana, do you want me to—"

"No." A man had only lifted Lana once before in her life, when Mary Eunice called the ambulance to save her from bleeding to death and they hoisted her onto the gurney. Every face had become Bloody Face's; if she had had enough strength, she would've decked the one closest to her, and Timothy had been punched enough for one night. "I'm fine. I can walk."

"We've got her," her mother said, and Frieda glowered up at him, echoing, "You've done enough today. Go help Roger."

In spite of her insistence, Lana's feet refused to traverse the rough terrain with much ease. The cold breeze tore through her sodden clothes, hardening the moisture into stiff frost, and the dry leaves swept up underneath her feet when she struggled to lift them high off the ground. "It's okay," Frieda said, voice as hushed as the wind whispering through the trees. She kissed Lana's cold cheek with warm, soft lips. I can't keep my eyes open. Lana staggered between them, draped like a sheet whipping on the line, blind and hopeless. I hope Mary Eunice is alright. "We're almost there—I can see the porchlight."

Their legs ripped from the underbrush and into the tall, dewy grass which licked their ankles and wet them. "Mama, can you get her up the steps? C'mon, Lana, one foot at a time." The stairs got bigger. Lana staggered up them, toes catching on each lip and pitching forward. She caught herself on her palms. When she drew back, dots of blood covered the heels of her hands. "We've got you, darlin', just a few more feet." Frieda tugged her back up. "We're gonna put you in front of the fireplace and let you get nice and warm."

Her toes caught on the doorframe again, but this time, they clutch ed her tighter when she stumbled, not allowing her to fall. Helen shouted, "Timothy! Make yourself useful and put a pot of water on the stove!"

He scrambled to obey. Roger perched over Mary Eunice in the floor in front of the fire. "I'm going to cut this sweater off of her." He didn't ask for permission, but rather made the announcement before his pocket knife flashed out in the orange firelight and slit the fabric of her sweater straight down the back. He pulled it off of her crumpled form like a hospital gown. Big fingers fumbled with the buttons of his flannel and draped it over her shoulders. "Lana? She's asking for you."

The tiny form had never appeared so pathetic, all crumpled up on the floor. Lana collapsed beside her, legs folding under her. She hissed at the harsh impact of her ass striking the carpet, but the instant she placed a hand on Mary Eunice's cheek, large blue eyes found hers. "I'm r-right here." I can't stop shaking. Lana exhaled; it trembled alongside her hands. In spite of the heat of the
flames, her skin refused to warm. "It's okay." Mary Eunice gathered up her arms beneath her, trying to sit up, but at her clumsy pawing, Lana scooted nearer. "No, no, stay down. I'm not going anywhere. Here." She pushed Mary Eunice's head down into her lap. "Stay still. Get warm."

Frieda sat beside her with a jacket in her lap. "You need to take off your wet shirt." Lana glanced down at her sodden long-sleeved shirt. "You need to take it off and get warm. You're going to get sick." At the second prompting, Lana fought with the hem of her shirt to lift it over her head, but her hands struggled to catch onto anything the way she intended, and finally, Frieda took it by the hem and tugged it off of her, offering the jacket to her in turn. "It's John's," she said. The heavy scent of cologne clung to it. "Do you need me to do the buttons?" Lana shook her head. "Okay. Mama's got you both some chicken broth on the stove."

Pawing at the buttons, Lana struggled with them, eventually getting the first three or four to catch and transferring the rest of her effort to Mary Eunice's flannel; Mary Eunice had no mind to button the flannel Roger had given her but instead lay miserable and quivering in Lana's lap. Lana bowed over at the middle to fasten the top few buttons. It's okay, she wanted to comfort her, but she didn't dare speak with Frieda so close beside her, hovering near enough to offer some body heat. She's delirious. Lana stiffened, tugging away, but Mary Eunice held fast. I can't do that to her. She withdrew her arm, but Mary Eunice caught her by the wrist and clutched it against her chest, right between her breasts. She's delirious. Lana narrowed her eyes at Frieda, but she merely smiled in return. Oh, fuck you. Lana narrowed her eyes at Frieda, and Frieda paused before she shrugged. "I ain't saying anything. I love you." Hesitation tripped inside of Lana's chest at the quiet words. Frieda continued, "We all got our things. I got eight kids. Roger and Tim'll go to their graves without finding a girl as long as they're joined at the hip. You're doin' better with women than they are."

Lana averted her eyes. "Did you really want eight kids?" she asked. She drew her thumb over Mary Eunice's eyebrow, feeling her every breath on her palm, trusting it to keep her fixed on the spot. "It's none of my business, but—it just doesn't seem like you, to me."

"Well, Mama said she wanted twelve grandbabies, and none of the rest of y'all were helping me out..." Lana cast her a sideways glance, and Frieda paused before she shrugged. "I guess not, no. It wasn't what I wanted. I wanted kids, of course, but not—not so many." She licked her lips, gazing into the flames, avoiding Lana's eyes. "You wanna know the truth?" Lana nodded in agreement. Why would I want anything else? "You gotta promise not to kick nobody's ass. I mean it."

A smile cracked across Lana's frozen lips. "I'm definitely prepared to get up and kick some tail," she teased halfheartedly. Mary Eunice pressed Lana's hand flat against her chest, so she could feel the other woman's heartbeat in her palm, throbbing onward as steady as a drum. "I promise. I won't hurt anybody. Couldn't if I wanted to."

Frieda inclined her eyebrows. "I..." She slid an arm around Lana's shoulders, hooking it there as she leaned in, keeping her voice a hushed whisper. "I asked the doctor to fix me when I was pregnant with Cindy. To, y'know. Tie my tubes, after she was born. He wouldn't do it, then, 'cause he said I would change my mind, and it wasn't reversible." She cleared her throat where it had gone hoarse. "And then I asked again, with Rex, because—I mean, who thinks six kids isn't enough? I've been almost constantly pregnant for the past six years, and I'm ready to be done."

"But?" Lana arched an eyebrow.

She sighed and shrugged. "The doctor needed John's consent to perform the procedure on me, and
John wouldn't give it. He kept blowing me off and saying he wanted to think about it—to see if it's something he really believes in. And then Rex was born, and…” She shook her head, a rueful smile growing on her lips but not reaching her eyes. "I was pregnant again before Rex even smiled for the first time. I haven't even brought it up this time. There's no point. He'll never agree. He sure as hell won't keep it in his pants, either." She glanced down at Lana's lap, hovering close enough for Lana to smell her breath; her soft, warm body made Lana want to curl up in her embrace and sleep like they did as children, spooned in a tent under the full moon. "Don't get me wrong—I love my kids. And I love John. He's a good man."

Lana pursed her lips. Fury twisted in the pit of her belly, but the sheer exhaustion muted it, replacing it with a regretful sadness, pity for all Frieda had to endure. "How good of a man is he, if he won't let you decide what to do with your body?" Again, Frieda shrugged, bowing her head and sucking on her lower lip. "Aren't you worried it's not safe?" Dying in childbirth sounds like a downright horrible way to go. Lana's stomach flipped, and she swallowed the bile building up in the pit of her stomach. "Tell him you're concerned about your health. He doesn't want to raise eight kids without you."

"Oh, please." Frieda waved her off. "That's a little melodramatic, don't you think? I don't want to scare him. What do you know, anyway? You've never been pregnant." Lana cringed at the words, and she glanced down at Mary Eunice, hoping to disguise her hurt on her face, but Frieda's lips parted in horror. "Oh, no. No, I didn't mean—Oh, god, I'm sorry. I just keep putting my foot in my mouth—" She paused, considering, and then she studied Lana again with new wide eyes. "Right now?"

Lana's eyes widened in turn. "God, no. I—I took care of it." Below, Mary Eunice knitted their fingers together. She's listening. She hadn't interrupted their conversation, but she provided what comfort she could to Lana. "Please don't tell Mama. She really will bury me." Frieda's aghast expression didn't disappear. "I know it was foolish. I didn't have any other options. And I nearly died from the blood loss. She did a shoddy job."

It donned on Frieda's face, no less troubled but increasingly sympathetic. "Abdominal surgery. Was that it?" Yeah. Lana pressed a tight grimace upon her lips. "Lana, I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"Nobody does." Except Mary Eunice. Mary Eunice was the only one who knew everything Lana had experienced, everything she had endured—or almost everything, anyway. I can tell her everything. She hoped she would, one day; she hoped she would be ready to tell Mary Eunice everything and grow from it. Is it wrong to burden her? She didn't want to harm Mary Eunice by sharing. She's so soft. I can't imagine hurting her. "I'm okay, though."

"I don't believe that for a minute." Frieda rubbed her shoulder. "I know you have to go back to Boston, but—I hope you keep in touch. John's house has a telephone. I'm the only one in the neighborhood who's home all day. We can talk all we want." She paused, and then she said, "Maybe in, like, fifteen years, I'll be able to go visit you." Lana chuckled. "I'm serious! I'll have all twelve of my kids big enough to take care of themselves by then, and I can pack up in my car and take off to Boston all by myself!"

Mary Eunice stirred under Lana's hand. She blinked a few times, and then she pushed herself up, not as clumsy as before; Lana helped pull her up and propped her against her shoulder, putting an arm around her waist. "It's a rough drive," Mary Eunice mumbled. Her eyelids, weighed heavily by sleep, drooped low, not quite closing, and she rested her cheek on Lana's shoulder. She's exhausted. This is her limit. She hasn't slept, and this is where she breaks.

Inclining her eyebrows, Lana agreed. "Yeah. It's not fun. We both could've been working off our
jetlag today, but someone decided we were better off spending our day stuck down in the creek."

Frieda's face fell. "I don't know what got into him. That was downright stupid. I still can't believe he did that." She turned her gaze back to the fire, which had warmed them enough to move around like reptiles baking in bright sunlight on a stone. "For years, I thought I wanted to be like you, you know. "Like me? "Not the whole woman thing. Or, maybe, I never gave that much thought, but probably not. I mean... Just running away and getting to live. Going to college. Getting a real career. Getting to live for myself. I love my family, but sometimes I wish I would've gotten to have my own experience first. But I don't have that. So I want to know all about yours. Some vicarious living and all that."

Helen brought two mugs of chicken broth to them. At her appearance, Mary Eunice sat up straight, and Lana withdrew her arm from around her waist. Her mother fixed a glare upon them, a warning. She said I had to follow her rules. Quietly, Mary Eunice whispered a thanks, wrapping both of her hands around the mug, and Lana followed suit, dodging eye contact. Instead, she nudged Mary Eunice. "You should go take a shower once you finish your drink. I'll go after you."

"Oh, Lana, I'm fine," she dissuaded, but Helen interrupted, "You both smell like fish pee, and Landon's will said no fish pee at his funeral. You both have to shower. I don't care in what order." A tiny smile cracked upon her lips. "I'm glad you're both feeling better. Supper leftovers are in the fridge if you're hungry."

A relieved sigh left Lana's nose, silent but leaving her lighter than before, losing the worry which had gathered in her shoulders. "Thanks, Mama. Glad to know you all were worried enough to lose your appetites. I'm too exhausted to be hungry. Lana's stomach ached with its emptiness, but she hoped she could put off food until the morning, when breakfast would taste better than ever before. I shouldn't look forward to tomorrow. I shouldn't look forward to burying my father. Somewhere, not too far away, his cold body lay in his casket, void of all soul, lacking everything which had made him him, every threat ever uttered or spanking ever allotted or hug ever given.

"Tim insisted you were trying to prank him back for hours. It wasn't until the sun started going down that we realized y'all were really in trouble," Frieda said. The floor trembled with heavy footsteps, and John appeared in the hallway. He didn't say anything, but he crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, an expectant look on his face. "Right," she grunted, somehow reading his mind or his face. She removed her arm from around Lana. "I've got to go to bed. Goodnight, Lana, Mama." You don't have to go with him, Lana wanted to say, some part of her still an older sister vowing to strangle any boy who broke her sister's heart. She bit her tongue. She couldn't cause marital problems for Frieda, not on top of everything else.

Mary Eunice emptied the mug of chicken broth. "Thank you, Mrs. Winters."

"No worries, dear. It's the least I can do, given my son nearly drowned you." She stroked Mary Eunice's hair. "Why don't you go take that shower?"

It was phrased as a question, but Lana knew her mother had just given a directive, not a suggestion. Fortunately, Mary Eunice read it correctly. "Yes, ma'am." With some struggle, she managed to climb to her feet without falling into the fire. All of the shivers hadn't left her, but she stood without shaking too hard. "Goodnight." She plodded off, one hand lingering in the air behind her, fanning by Lana's hair but not quite brushing it, the most she could offer.

Timothy and Roger both cleared their throats as they surveyed the empty living room. "Well, Mama, we're gonna take off. We'll see you tomorrow, alright? At the funeral home." They each patted her shoulder and filed out the front door, closing it in their wake.
Out the window, Gus sprawled across the porch; someone had provided him with a few blankets, and he grabbed at the moths fluttering around with open jaws. The shift to outdoors hadn't fazed him much. *He was probably an outdoor dog his whole life before he met us.* Lana swept her gaze away from him back up to her mother. "I'm sorry. I'll keep my hands to myself. She was cold. I just wanted to warm her up."

Narrow eyes met hers. "I don't like the way you look at her. You know my rules."

"Yes, ma'am." *I can't stop myself from feeling things!* Lana had no strength or willpower to argue. *Mary Eunice is mine now.* Her heart warmed at the thought. Mary Eunice was hers after all of the times she had thought it was never possible. She would never have dreamed of Mary Eunice feeling the way she felt. Her chest squelched with sheer emotion. *It isn't right. I ought to be holding her. We ought to be snuggling. We should be enjoying what we have now. Not separating ourselves for someone else's benefit.* All of her tribulations would pass, eventually, but she loathed that she couldn't show Mary Eunice her love, that they had to pass secret glances and hide themselves from the eyes of her family just as she and Wendy had done over a decade ago. "It won't be a problem. Sister Mary Eunice is off limits."

"That doesn't mean you don't feel things for her."

Lana swallowed an exasperated huff. "Mama," she murmured, "I can't keep myself from having feelings. That's what people do. She's my best friend."

"Wendy was your best friend, too." *You're right. I keep falling in love with my friends. I'm caught.* Lana sucked on her lower lip, unable to refute her point. Helen's stern gaze softened. "I love you. I don't want you to get hurt. A woman like that will only break your heart. Somebody who chose God once, over everything else, will choose God again and again." She tugged a lock of greasy hair behind Lana's ear. "People go to the church to run away from the pain of the real world. There's nothing more real and painful than the kind of love you have. She wouldn't have the balls to stay. She's sweet, but she's soft. You can see it in her face."

*She is soft, but she's strong. She's seen more than you can imagine.* Lana bit her tongue. Those weren't her secrets to divulge, even to her mother, even to defend Mary Eunice's honor. "I know, Mama. I promise." *She would do anything to protect me. She would jump in front of a loaded gun, and that scares the hell out of me.*

Helen leaned forward and kissed the crown of her head. "Go take a shower and get some rest. You had a long day." She stood, back popping as she acted; she grunted like it pained her. *She's aging.* Lana's heart sank. *But she's far from old.* Her mother had a whole life left to live without her father. *How many lives do I have left without Wendy?*

Only a fate crueler than the devil himself would take Mary Eunice away from her now. She trusted Mary Eunice with everything, with every fibre of her being, with every nerve and synapse; she trusted Mary Eunice wouldn't break her heart. Something would work out. *She has to pick me or God eventually.* Lana shoved the dark thought away. *No. We can be happy just like this.*

Her mother flicked off the light, leaving her in the darkness—a cue for her to go to bed. She rose and staggered down the hall to their bedroom, where they would spend the night apart.
Our Dancing Has Turned to Mourning

Chapter Notes

Lamentations 5:15
Last week, I decided to take a break from TLaG (350,000 words on the same project in one go is exhausting) to write a Bananun one-shot, which I've posted. I'm glad to be back!
And, according to my outline, we've got about fifteen chapters left in this work!
We're getting closer to the end!

In the front of a Baptist church, Mary Eunice perched beside Lana on the pew, cast in the colored light filtering through stained glass. At the base of the stage, the casket rested, open and revealing the face of Lana’s father, peaceful and placid in death. The morticians had made him beautiful. A heavy suit masked his frail limbs. He had a rose between his hands. A blue pocket square drew out the color in his tie. His hair was combed and face shaven. Mary Eunice’s eyes kept darting to him from under her veil, examining the man she had met only once before his death—mere hours before his death, at that. **He loved Lana. He made us come all this way just to tell her that he loved her, just to apologize.** Beside her, Lana sniffled. Mary Eunice reached into the pocket of her habit and fumbled for her rosary. She offered her hand, palm open and holding the string of beads, to Lana, and at the nudging on her thigh, Lana accepted the gift, tangling their fingers together with the crucifix dangling from their joined hands. It was a clever disguise, the only way Mary Eunice could provide comfort to her girlfriend without suspicion.

My girlfriend. Mary Eunice’s stomach flipped. They hadn’t had the opportunity to talk about the things they had said in the creek—they hadn’t had a moment of privacy since the night before. The morning had swept them away with Frieda’s children screaming, Frieda and Helen weeping, John shouting into the phone at his boss, and Timothy and Roger exchanging knowing looks and whispers no one else could make out. *Is that still what she wants? Is that what I want? Is it something we should want?* Romance violated her vow of chastity, that was certain, but she couldn’t hear God guiding her. She had no guidance at all besides the imperative inside of her which said she, a nun, could not have a romantic or erotic relationship. *Why did the pieces fall this way if I am not meant to love Lana?* Everything was perfect, like God had lined everything up. *I prayed for a sign, a clear sign, and Lana told me she loved me the next day. That has to be a clear sign.*

Silent rivulets of tears slipped down Lana’s cheeks, which she hid by lowering her head and dashing them away with a handkerchief. Mary Eunice’s heart squeezed at the sight, but she could offer nothing more than her hand with the rosary clutched between them. *I want to comfort her. I want to know she’s okay.* Down the pew, Frieda choked on her own sob and twisted away to bury her face in John’s chest. All of the children sniffled except Rex, the baby, who bounced in Helen’s lap and entertained himself with the string of pearls around her neck. Every woman in the church had covered her head with a bonnet or ornate hat, and more than one pair of eyes fixed upon Mary Eunice’s back; she had never felt so much like a spectacle before in her life, even as a nun.

At the front of the church, behind the pulpit, a grizzled old preacher with the voice of a cowboy ministered to the congregation. “Today, we all have the misfortune of saying farewell to our brother, Landon Winters. Landon lost his fight against a rare form of pancreatic cancer and went
home to the arms of the Lord yesterday morning. Today, we come together both in mourning for a life taken too soon and celebration of another soul gone home to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.” The man gruffly cleared his throat and coughed into his handkerchief. “The Winters family has belonged to this congregation since Landon was a boy, when my father still ran things around here. He and his wife raised four babies right here in this very church. I can say with certainty I’ve never known a man to bring people to God more than Landon did. Landon knew how to show someone a Christ-like spirit without ever bringing the Bible into the conversation. My daddy always said you gotta exemplify Christ to bring people to Him—why would anybody wanna be with Christ if they think his followers are a ton of jerks?”

The crowd snickered, watery and weak laughter, but Lana averted her eyes, jaw set tight where she glowered at the ground. He wasn’t very Christlike to her when he chased her away. Mary Eunice caressed the back of Lana’s hand with her thumb. “Landon had his values, and he would bend them for no man. God came first in his life and in the life of his family. Every man has his faults, but Landon’s were few and far between. He was a church deacon, raising two sons as altar boys. He instilled virtues into his kids to make them providers and homemakers. Proverbs 22:6 says, ‘Train a child up in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.’”

Lana winced as he uttered these words. She lifted her head from the floor. Mary Eunice followed her gaze to find the minister locking eyes with Lana. Holding eye contact, he continued, “All of Landon’s children grew in his image to become good Christian folk. They might have strayed for a spell, but they’ve all learned no good comes of parting from the way of the father’s hand.” He’s antagonizing her! Mary Eunice narrowed her eyes, shooting a glance to Lana, but Lana didn’t react, remaining as steady as a serpent staring into the eyes of a hypnotist. He’s doing it on purpose! Her eyes stung with furious tears. This is her father’s funeral, and he’s trying to bully her! Hand clenching tight, Lana winced, and Mary Eunice uncurled her fist. “Good children preserving the good white blood we’ve got here, keeping the Negro from invading this community, keeping the perverseness of the homosexual and the rest of the country out as we cling to our Baptist heritage. We remember here a man must look over his household to keep his wife and children in line, and Jesus will look over him.” Lana and Mary Eunice both cringed, but Timothy and Roger merely exchanged a look, and Frieda only licked her lips while John gave no indication he had heard, their hands folded together in a tight clasp.

“We preserve the natural order—a man and a wife and a brood of children to bring honor on them as they join the flock of God’s almighty sheep. Judgment Day will come to us all, just as it came to Landon, and we will all stand before the almighty throne and face the almighty’s decision. You gotta make sure you know where you’re headed.” The minister’s sharp gaze slid from Lana to her. “A wolf can wear the most faithful clothing, but ultimately, the Lord knows who is and isn’t a proper servant. No one who bows their head to a false idol can enter the kingdom of heaven.” Me? I’ve never bowed to an idol before in my life. What does he think a nun is? Mary Eunice glanced to Lana, sideways, hoping to read something in her expression to grant some clue to the minister’s affront toward her. “No one who prays to anyone other than the Lord our God may enter the kingdom of heaven. Not Buddha, not Allah, not Mary or any of the so-called saints…” But… Mary Eunice quirked her brow. She had never heard someone fundamentally misunderstand Catholicism and all of its tenets before in her life. His hostile gaze didn’t waver from her. Her heart skipped a beat. Pinching the rosary between her fingers, she steeled herself. Those prayers aren’t like that. We pray to Mary and the saints to ask them to pray for us… She knew better than to try to correct anyone.

Lana studied Mary Eunice from the corner of her eye, lips pursed. All the eyes on her sent a red blush crawling up her neck. All of Lana’s siblings stared at her, and Helen, too, though none of them regarded her with judgment—they were confused and appalled. “Do you want to leave?” Lana whispered. Mary Eunice shook her head. This isn’t about me. This is a funeral.
Helen eased up from her spot, though the minister hadn’t ceased his blathering. “Our brother, Landon, never would’ve strayed enough to bring an alcoholic beverage into the church and cite it as the blood of Christ…” He drifted off when he saw her approaching, climbing the stairs to the stage past the altar. “Yes, Mrs. Winters?”

“Excuse me, Pastor Johnson, but my family has been through a great ordeal. Frieda’s children will be due for a nap soon, and Lana and Sister Mary Eunice have traveled over a thousand miles to join us today.” She paused; in the silence, the reverent church produced a few Amen!s which startled Mary Eunice, who had never known anyone to interrupt a church service before. “I’d really just like to say a few words about my husband so we can go to the cemetery and not preoccupy the sanctuary any longer. This place has got to be prepared for the children’s Christmas pageant tomorrow, and I’d hate to think we’re deterring set up.”

The minister hesitated. The confrontation had startled him; he hadn’t expected an interruption during his spiel about fire and brimstone. But he took a step back from the podium, opening an arm for her to take the pulpit and speak. “Of course, Mrs. Winters. It’s Christmas Eve. Everyone should be home with their families.” He pressed a smile to his face, but it didn’t reach his eyes, and as he strode off the stage, he glared daggers at Lana and Mary Eunice. Her stomach flipped at the menace within his eyes. 

He doesn’t even know us. How can he hate us so much? How can he hate something he doesn’t possibly understand? The world hated Lana without ever knowing her, and now, she was hated, as well, for more reasons than one. All of the time she had spent defending Lana from those who loathed her came back to haunt her now, for the people who struck at Lana would double their efforts if they suspected what lay between them. No one can know. A certain fear panged inside of her, the terror Lana and Wendy had known for their whole lives. People will hurt us for this.

She had accepted the risk of being Lana’s friend months ago. She had no fear of bodily harm. She would lay down her life for Lana in an instant without question or consideration. But they would separate us. They had separated Lana and Wendy. She knotted her fingers tighter with Lana’s. I couldn’t live with myself if anyone hurt her because of me. Tears stung her eyes. It didn’t escape Lana’s notice. “Are you okay?” she whispered, hushed under the mumbling of the uncertain crowd, which didn’t quite know how to interpret the tension between the minister and the widow. “We can leave if you’re afraid.”

“I’m not. I’m fine.” Mary Eunice tangled her fingers in between the beads of the rosary. God, please protect us. If this is Your will, keep Lana from harm’s way. She has known so much grief and pain already at the hands of people who hate before they love. I don’t want to watch her suffer any longer. She deserves a clearer future. I pray for her to know immense love of all kinds, to learn her own worth now.

Helen cleared her throat. “I was meant to give a speech, but I forgot to ask my daughter to write it for me, so I guess I’m going to wing it.” A few watery chuckles tittered through the crowd at her introduction. “Landon told me he was sick four months ago. We were at home, alone, and he asked me which one of us I thought would die first. That’s—That’s one of those questions you ask yourself, eventually, when you’ve been in a relationship long enough. You’ve lived so long with another person, and loved them so long, you can’t imagine ever having a world without them in it—but you know that one of you is going to have to face it, at some point.” She unfolded a handkerchief and blew her nose. “When I answered him, I said, ‘You’ve gotta go first, because if I go first, you’ll starve to death.’ I think I made a joke about not having to worry about him taking up the house for the rest of his retirement. And then he told me.

“They gave him two months. We knew we didn’t have a whole lot of time. Try putting three of your children in a room together and telling them they’ve got eight weeks to spend with their father. Or explaining to your granddaughter that she isn’t able to sit in granddaddy’s lap anymore.
It’s like when you wade into a bed of cottonmouths in the river. They just keep biting you. That’s what it’s like, losing him. Every day, I woke up and realized something else lost with him being sick. He didn’t snore in bed like he used to, like a growling bear. The first night he spent in the hospital was the first night I’d spent without him since we were married, thirty-eight years ago. And that morning, I got up and brewed two cups of coffee. The house doesn’t smell like cigarettes anymore.”

She sniffled, long and hard, but her voice didn’t tremble. Lana got her fire from her mother. An unimaginable steel settled on Helen’s face. “But, last week, I talked to Landon. He didn’t know what day it was, so I told him it was December seventeenth. He said, ‘I gotta go before Christmas. Y’all will kill me if I mess up the kids’ Christmas pageant.’” Everyone tittered their weak laughter again. “That’s always how Landon was. Selfless. His whole life, he gave from himself to other people. All four of our kids were born in the 30’s—before the war. He never let them go hungry, if it meant scraping the chopped beef off of his own plate. He’d work twelve hours at the sawmill and come home and play catch with his kids in the yard. Nothing was more important to him than his family. He adored his kids. He never forgot a birthday and always managed to piece something together. When Lana turned six, we were so out of ideas—I didn’t even have enough flour to bake a cake. She got birthday oatmeal.” Frieda laughed, and Lana’s cheeks flushed pink; she hid her face in her hands. “And that night, he took her out under the night sky and told her she could have star. Lana was always a rebel, so she asked if she could have the moon instead. So if anyone ever asks, you know who won the space race, almost thirty years ago.”

The uncomfortable laughter of the crowd rose up again. I’ve never heard so many people laughing about someone dying. Mary Eunice’s experience with funerals was all morose and dank and black, people buried in veils behind handkerchiefs and huddling around the box which held the shell of the person they had loved. “I’m sorry. If I keep telling jokes, I won’t have to cry as much in front of my children.” Helen wiped her dribbling nose with the handkerchief, shaking her head. “Landon was such a good father, a good man, and a good husband. He gave himself to everyone he ever met, and—and if that’s true, he’s still here, as much as he ever was. I know my kids take him with them. My sons are both police officers, out there helping the less fortunate. Lana writes articles revealing corrupt corporations to the general public. Frieda gives all of herself to her children, just as Landon did. They’re good people, spreading everything he taught them. I think it’s best for us not to think about what we’re losing. It’s not what he would want, anyway. He wanted us to enjoy the Christmas pageant, and knowing him, every moment after, too. So I’m not going to waste anymore time up here blathering on. Thank you all for coming.”

Helen stepped down off of the podium, and the pallbearers closed the casket and lifted it, leading the way out of the church and toward the hearse. The rest of the church followed, all streaming to their cars, where a police escort waited with flashing beam. Mary Eunice filed out in a straight line behind Lana, folded over with her head down. The gazes upon her reminded her of her foreignness here. Rosary shoved in her pocket, she wrapped it around her fingers, the only solace she found in feeling like such a spectacle. The escorting officer nodded in greeting to Timothy and Roger as they passed, heading to their own car. Frieda and John fought to get all six of their children into the car, Frieda weeping and choking as she did so; Helen went to their aid and scooped up one of their wayward twins. But Lana didn’t make a beeline for her car like the others. She stepped aside beside the church door and lingered, as if waiting for something, for someone.

“Lana?” Mary Eunice halted beside her. Lana leaned back against the building, clutching her purse tight enough for her knuckles to whiten. Her bloodshot eyes gleamed in the yellow mid-morning air. “What’s the matter?” The crowd thinned. The escort left the parking lot, and cars streamed after him. “Aren’t we going to the cemetery?”

“I know the way to the cemetery.” She glanced back over her shoulder as the last group headed for their car from the church doors. Mary Eunice tiptoed to peek back into the sanctuary. The
minister headed down the aisle between the pews toward them. “You can wait in the car,” Lana hedged. No, never. Mary Eunice shook her head, and Lana didn’t challenge her again. The man emerged from the church, heavy wooden doors slamming shut behind him. He stood a head taller than Lana, thick brown hair and hot green eyes regarding both of them with equal vitriol. “Pastor Johnson.” Lana addressed him through gritted teeth; the bitterness seared through her voice, and Mary Eunice stifled the urge to grab her hand in an attempt to calm her. I don’t think Pastor Johnson would appreciate that very much. “Did you want to speak with me?”

He glowered down at them, down the bridge of his upturned nose, which crinkled like he smelled garbage. “I thought Landon was kidding when he said he hoped you would be back in town. When he said he had asked Frieda to call you.”

“Is it wrong for someone to want to see his children before he dies?”

“It’s wrong for anyone to consider you a member of the family still.” Lana didn't blink at the sharp words, but Mary Eunice flinched. Lana belongs to the family as much as anyone else! She set her jaw and crossed her arms to keep from reflexively grabbing Lana by the elbow. “Fred and Sally did right. Six children in attendance. Six children they cared to claim. The ark closed its gates on the sinners of the earth, and so they closed their family to those who still believed and practiced in the ways of the Lord. Your father let death soften him to his faith, God forgive him.”

“With all due respect, Pastor, I believe my place in my family is best decided by my family, not any outsider. My father made many mistakes, and I’m in no position to pass judgment on anyone. I’m here because it was important to him and my family. I don’t have a quarrel with anyone here.”

“You have a quarrel with me, bringing a pagan into my church.” He nodded pointedly at Mary Eunice.

She blinked, taken aback by his bold accusation. “Me? Pagan?” Her lips quirked, trying to puzzle through it. Had he simply never met a Catholic before? She hadn’t seen any chapels since entering the state, save for when they passed through Atlanta. “Sir, I—I’m a Catholic. I believe in the same God you do. I’m not a pagan.” Is this really the debate we should be having at a funeral? They’re all going to be at the cemetery by the time we get in the car. “And I’m not looking to convert anyone. I’m just here to offer support.”

He drew himself up, mouth pressed into a thin line, self-righteousness imbued in his broad chest and balled fists. “You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me!” A bit of spittle rained from the corners of his lips. “Your string of beads is a symbol of false prophets and prayers to nonexistent beings, and I do not appreciate it in my church!”

Narrowing her eyes, Mary Eunice tilted his head. My rosary? Pursing her lips, she objected, “‘You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.’ I know Exodus as well, Pastor.” His lips buffered, befuddled by her faithful reply, and his face flushed like a wrinkly tomato. “The rosary symbolizes a prayer favored by Mother Mary which offers meditation on the life of Jesus. It isn’t a prayer to any false idol. It’s a request for Mary to pray for us, just as we offer to the saints. Some people ask their lost loved ones for prayer, as well. It’s the same as placing prayer requests toward the living.”

Lana placed a soft hand on the inside of her elbow, for a series of bloodshot vessels burst in the whites of his eyes, leaving his eyes rimmed in red. “You should learn your place! In the home! Looking after the children and providing for your husband! Instead of some half-cracked marriage to God—your kind is why good men like me can’t find wives.” Mary Eunice bit her lip to keep it from curling in revulsion. You? Marry you? I’d rather die. Her skin rose into goosebumps at the
notion, and as he took a step nearer, she shrank back against Lana’s soft body. Cigarette smoke clung to his clothing and his breath. “The walls of the abbey won’t protect you here, Sister.” He jabbed a sharp finger at her chest.

Lana slapped his hand away. “Lay a hand on her, I dare you. My brothers can have every policeman in the next three counties here in half an hour.” Her hard eyes glittered. Her eyebrows had stitched themselves together in a hard wrinkle on her forehead, loathing held in the downward twist of her mouth. “God forbid a woman should ever make herself unavailable to you in any way. That’s a punishable offense to you, isn’t it?”

“A woman of childbearing age has a duty. Your sister could tell you something about it.”

Lana set her jaw. A million retorts rested in her smoldering gaze, but she didn’t say anything else to him. She wrapped her palm around Mary Eunice’s wrist. “We need to go to my father’s funeral. We didn’t come here to heckle with you. We’ll be out of your hair before the new year.” She tugged Mary Eunice back, away from the towering man.

Narrow eyes fixed on the both of them. “Watch your backs. Both of you. There are certain perversions this community will not tolerate. Your father was a fool to bring you back here. I want no bloodshed on this soil, but it’s already red with our confederate forefathers.”

“Don’t waste your breath. We already heard it all from Fred Peyser. Goodbye, Pastor Johnson.” Mary Eunice trotted to keep up with Lana, heading back to the car with her head and eyes down. Her shoes kicked up dust from the dirt path, so foreign compared to the gravel she knew from Boston. Pinching the skirt of her habit, she stepped into the car and folded herself inside, slamming the door shut. Lana followed, shoving her key into the ignition. Her chest quivered with a heavy breath, but as Mary Eunice reached for her, Lana shook her head. “Don’t. He’s still watching.” The motor sputtered to life, the quiet radio humming so they could hear little more than the percussion underlying the chords. Lana’s breath caught in her throat. She shifted gears and rolled out of the clay parking lot, leaving the church vacant. The midday sunlight glimmered off of the tear rolling down her cheek.

Once they had left behind the silhouette of the church, Mary Eunice scooted across the seat. On each of Lana’s hands, the knuckles whitened from where she gripped the steering wheel, so she rested her hand on Lana’s thigh instead. Lana shuddered. “What can I do?” I want to help. I want to kiss you until you don’t hurt anymore. I want to hold you until you know you’re safe in my arms.

One hand loosened its grip on the steering wheel and covered hers, squeezing it tight. A thick sheen of sweat coated her palm. Her throat popped when she swallowed, stuffing down the lump in her throat. “Nothing. Not while we’re here.” A coldness poured into Mary Eunice’s gut, an utter helplessness. I’m powerless. She couldn’t offer Lana anything—she couldn’t hug her in her grief or kiss her for a distraction or wipe away her tears to cleanse her beautiful face. Tongue darting across her lips, Lana whispered, “It hurt me so badly, going to bed last night without you. After everything. I thought I was better than this—I shouldn’t let them keep us apart—”

“Lana, it’s okay.” Mary Eunice rubbed the back of her hand with her thumb. “I’m here. If sleeping separately makes them happy, it doesn’t hurt me. I know how I feel about you.”

“I heard you moaning in your sleep last night.” Mary Eunice sucked on her lower lip with deep thought at the words. She thought her nightmare had escaped Lana’s notice; the months had improved her ability to stifle her screams and jostle the bed less when she awoke from the grips of the demon once again. “And there wasn’t a goddamn thing I could do about it. Just lie there and grit my teeth and hope it passed soon. That kills me.”
Cradling Lana’s hand between hers, Mary Eunice rubbed the underside of her palm. “But we’ll be headed home soon enough, won’t we?” This couldn’t have been timed worse. How many months had they both bitten their tongues on their revelations about love? How much time could they have spent together, already, as lovers rather than friends on the brink? How much suffering could it have saved them, being able to rejoice in their newfound relationship instead of stifling it and hiding it? “Just a few more days.”

A heavy sigh flared Lana’s nostrils. “I know. I know. It doesn’t make it any easier right now, though. That I finally had the sense to tell you, and they’re keeping us apart.”

“I know.” Mary Eunice lifted Lana’s arm and scooted closer to drape it over her own shoulders; Lana hugged her tight in the embrace. “I’m in the business of depriving myself of things I like, though. It’s easier for me than it is for you.” She rested her cheek against Lana’s soft shoulder, blinking up at her face. In her tight clutches, Lana’s sweet perfume floated up from her sweater. Her smooth skin rippled where it bathed in the sunlight, and an urge in Mary Eunice rose to caress every inch of her exposed flesh. Is this lust? She bit her lip at the thought. “Maybe we could snuggle in the lower bed if we woke up before everyone else, so no one would see us.”

Lana shook her head. “No, my mother—she’ll smell our happiness and banish it.” She inclined her head just a bit to kiss the top of Mary Eunice’s head. “I’m sorry my brother nearly killed you.”

“Oh, I’m fine. It brought us here, didn’t it?”

“You almost froze to death.”

“That was my fault.”

“Yeah, it was. It was really dumb.” Mary Eunice’s cheeks tinged pink, and she didn’t have an argument; in the moment, it had seemed like the best idea, to wrap herself around Lana like a human blanket and protect her from the elements as much as possible so she could rest while waiting for rescue. She hadn’t expected it to become so devastatingly cold. “I thought you were dead. There was frost in your hair.” Lana’s arm flexed tighter around her shoulders, cradling her close as their speed down the road protected them from any prying eyes. “I thought I would lose you before they found us.”

Mary Eunice pressed a kiss to the curve of Lana’s shoulder through her sweater. “I’m sorry. It was foolish of me.” Lana already lost Wendy. I have to keep myself safe for her. I need to stay in one piece for her. “I didn’t mean for any of that to happen. I just wanted you to be warm.”

“You can’t set yourself on fire to keep me warm.” Lana massaged her bicep, fingers gentle and probing at her muscle and skin. “Timothy shouldn’t have been such an asshole. He’s always been a jerk like that. Trying to play pranks and getting people hurt in the process. I’m surprised the police department keeps him around. Or that he hasn’t accidentally killed someone yet, actually, with some stupid joke.” Her hand stilled where it rubbed Mary Eunice’s upper arm. “I love you,” she added in a soft afterthought.

A smile twinged to Mary Eunice’s lips. “I love you, too. More than the whole world.”

The cemetery was full by the time they arrived, and they had no parking. Lana parked on the street and led the way up to the crowd, all piling flowers up onto the monument and the heap of dirt which marked where the coffin had entered the earth. Helen seized Lana by the front of her shirt. “Where on earth have you been?” Lana began to shrug her off, but she pressed, “It was the pastor, wasn’t it?”

“Mama, it’s not a big deal.”
“What did he say to you?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Mary Eunice stood back, far out of reach, a mere observer of Lana’s family; Frieda still clung to John, face buried in his neck, while Timothy offered Roger a tissue. Helen bounced the baby on her hip. She was the only one without a tear in her eye or on her cheek. “Do you want me to take him?” Lana offered, opening her arms, and Helen passed Rex to her. She accepted him with a grimace, arms all awkward where they wrapped around him, uncertain where her hands fit best on the baby’s hips, around his tiny body. “We’re fine. He didn’t have anything to say that I haven’t heard a thousand times before. Go check on Frieda.”

Helen pecked Lana on the cheek, and she patted her on the back before she turned away, marching back toward Frieda and John. The children had gathered in front of the grave, Terry kicking at the loose soil with her shoe. “We should watch them,” Mary Eunice suggested, nudging Lana from behind. “Let me take him. You look like you’ve never seen a baby before in your life.”

“Take him. I don’t know how to do it right.” Mary Eunice folded him onto her hip, and they approached the gathering of the children, the twins gathering handfuls of dirt and hurling them at one another. “Hey—guys, let’s not throw dirt. Your mama won’t like that very much.” Lana grimaced as she squatted beside the toddlers. She scooped Stuart up under the arms and tugged him to his feet. “Here. Dust off your hands. You’re wearing good clothes. You, too, Sue.”

She cradled the tiny, sticky hands in her own and swatted the dirt off of them. “Terry, don’t get your shoes dirty. We’ve got to go to church again tomorrow. Your shoes need to be clean.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Well, at least one of them knows how to listen like a human being. Lana bit the inside of her cheek, stifling her distaste. Terry took a step back from the soft dirt and wiped the toes of her shoes off on the grass. “Miss Sister?” Mary Eunice hummed in response. “Is it true that you know more about God than everybody else?”

“No, sweetheart, I don’t know more than anyone else. I took vows to serve God, but I’m not smarter than anyone else.”

Terry pursed her lips, apparently displeased with the answer. After a brief hesitation, she pressed, “But can you tell us about heaven? When we get to be with Jesus like Granddaddy? What’s that gonna be like? I asked Mama but she just keeps on crying.”

Oh. Lana glanced to Mary Eunice, a child’s hand in each palm; if she kept tugging them upright, she could keep them out of the dirt and salvage what clean spots remained of their good clothes. Is that okay? But Mary Eunice’s face didn’t so much as twitch. The child’s question hadn’t fazed her. “Nobody knows what heaven is like, exactly. But we know that Jesus said the Father’s house has many rooms, and He is preparing a place for us. God says that there is no hunger or thirst in heaven because He takes us to the living water. God will wipe every tear away.”

“Then how come Mama is crying?” Bruce pressed, crossing his arms in a huff; he hadn’t agreed to wear his church clothes very easily. “If heaven is so great, I mean.”

“It hurts when you can’t see someone you love for a very long time. Wouldn’t you be very sad if you couldn’t see your father for a long time?” Bruce sucked his lower lip and nodded, contemplating the ramifications of her words with the toe of his shoe tapping the ground. “Even though heaven is a really good place, it makes us sad when we can’t see our loved ones. Do you understand?” He bobbed his head, eyes suddenly welling with tears. “But the ones we love in heaven watch over us and keep us safe. So you’re never really alone, and he’s never really gone.”

Cindy tugged on Mary Eunice’s leg. She looked the least like Frieda; she had round blue eyes the color of water and a thin mop of curly blonde hair. “Miz Sister,” she prompted, pink lips forming a
little pout. “When is Granddaddy coming back from heaven? He can tell us all about it then, right?
And then we’ll know.”

“Don’t be silly.” Terry waved her off. “Granddaddy isn’t coming back. He’s dead.” Cindy’s lips parted into an O of shock. “That’s why they put him in the ground in the box.”

“But they can just dig him up again!” she wailed. “Once he’s better! Heaven will make him better, and then he can come back and tell us about it.”

“Nuh-uh,” Bruce objected. “Heaven’s like jail. Once you go there, you never get out.”

“Uncle Tim and Roy put people in heaven?”

Lana blinked hard, struggling to follow the logic of the children’s conversation. She cleared her throat. “We should go back to your Mama and Daddy. C’mon, c’mon.” She herded Cindy with her legs, dragging each twin by the arm. I hate the doctor who wouldn’t take Frieda’s word for it. Nobody can handle this many kids. And she’s got two more on the way. Lana couldn’t imagine handling two newborns in addition to this mess.

Cindy charged ahead toward Frieda, and Frieda scooped her up and planted a wet, sloppy kiss on her face. “It’s okay, darling, I’m alright.” She inhaled deeply in Cindy’s pale hair, cradling her close. Cindy uttered a thin whimper. “What’s the matter, baby? Why are you crying?”

“I want Granddaddy to come back! How’s he s’posed to get outta the dirt? It’s not fair! Why can’t he come back?” She grabbed the ruffled corners of Frieda’s sweater in tiny balled fists, buffering a protest against the rocking in her mother’s gait. “I want him to come back from heaven!”

“People don’t come back from heaven, sweetie,” John said. “Heaven is forever and ever. Once you go there, you can’t ever come back. Heaven is for people who die, and people don’t ever come back from dying.”

Cindy uttered another pathetic wail of distress, and Frieda said, “John!” in an aghast voice. He shrugged her off. “This is hard enough. Let’s just frighten them, while we’re at it.”

“I don’t wanna die!” Cindy wailed. “I don’t wanna go to heaven! I wanna stay here!” At the sound of their sister’s distress, each of the twins gained big watery eyes, dribbling streams rolling down their cheeks. “I want Granddaddy to come back! Make him come back!” Frieda shot John an exasperated look, bloodshot eyes filling with tears again, though she managed to restrain herself from bursting out again. “Mama, please! Make him come back!” She thrashed with her tiny fists against Frieda’s body. “I don’t wanna leave him!”

Helen swept up behind Lana and picked up Stuart, and when fixed under a harsh gaze, Lana copied her, taking Sue and hoisting her onto her hip. “John,” snapped the matriarch; he winced away from her at the sharp address, “at the very least, make yourself useful and help us take your spawn back to the car.” Sue flipped her head back and uttered a long bawl, and Stuart took the hint and caterwauled alongside her. Lana grimaced. I can’t believe he did this to her. She scowled in John’s direction, but Frieda dodged eye contact with everyone, striding far ahead with her head down and the bridge of her nose pinched between her fingers, trying to disguise her tears. Mama said it at the church. She doesn’t want to cry in front of her children. And she’s losing. Mary Eunice plodded in pursuit of Frieda, saddled with the lightest weight, but even she couldn’t keep stride.

Cramming three children in the backseat and the baby in Frieda’s lap, Helen took Terry and Bruce by the hands. “We’re riding with you,” she told Lana. Yes, Mama, that’s fine. It’s not like I bought my car with my own money or anything. “We’ve got enough of a headache without listening to
screaming all the way home.” She invited herself in the passenger seat of Lana’s car, and Mary Eunice sheepishly tucked herself into the backseat with the two children. In one hand, Helen clutched her balled up handkerchief. Snot had discolored it beyond recognition. Her eyes had red rims but had gone dry. “Are you going to tell me about what Pastor Johnson said to you now, or am I to guess?”

*Of course.* Lana bit her lip, holding back a wince. “I told you, Mama, it was nothing. It’s nothing worth worrying about.” She cranked her car and glanced in the rearview mirror to do a headcount, Mary Eunice’s veil black and obtrusive like a mass of black resting behind her. Mary Eunice met her eyes in the mirror, and then she combed her hand between her hair and coif, stripping it off of her head. Her churchy braid fell onto her shoulders, and she held her veil in her lap. “Is everyone in? No missing limbs?” She loathed to think of the fall-out if she accidentally left behind a member of the child army. *Frieda would kick my ass all over the yard again.* Mary Eunice nodded to her. In the mirror, she could hold eye contact with her girlfriend, the longest gaze they had shared in quite a long time. *She has such beautiful eyes. No one should ever be deprived of her eyes. They’re like the water of life.* Mary Eunice smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners with its genuineness. Lana’s heart warmed.

Her mother’s head whipped around, eyes narrow with judgment. *Shit.* Lana slammed the car into reverse and sped out of the cemetery; John’s car had left minutes ago, and more of the spectators trickled back to their vehicles, clogging up the road. “If Pastor Johnson has something to say about my family, it’s something worth worrying about to me.”

“Mama, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Did I ask what you wanted?”

*I’m thirty-four years old. I can make my own decisions.* But all of the mature snips in Lana’s mind died on her tongue, and instead, her brain shrank down to a tiny girl again, answering her stern mother with trembling lips and round eyes. “No, ma’am.” She clutched the wheel tighter as she drove up on another car’s bumper, following the slow line of traffic out of the cemetery. *John and Frieda escaped right before it got backed up. Now I’m trapped in hell.* “Pastor Johnson has a bone to pick with me being invited back to his church without his consent. If it’s such a big deal, I won’t go to the Christmas pageant. People won’t want me around their children, anyway. We’ll stay home and pack our bags and leave the next morning.”

She huffed, crossing her arms. “So you’re just going to let him bully you out of town? Is that it?” Lana bit her tongue, sucking on her front teeth; she knew better than to put a foot out of place by answering this question. “If he has a problem with my family, he needs to address me. Not you. Who stays in my house, on my land, is my business. And the church belongs to God, not to any one man. Who enters it is between them and God, nobody else, and certainly not any holier-than-thou pastor with his head too far up his own ass to see the sunlight.” Terry and Bruce squeaked in the backseat at the expletive, but she didn’t apologize for it. Lana inched the car nearer to the car in front of her, hoping to push it down the street and escape her mother all the faster. “It isn’t his place. You belong at the church as much as anyone else.”

Biting back a sigh, Lana measured her thoughts. “Mama, I—I appreciate what you want to do, but I don’t want to start trouble with anybody while I’m here.” *It’s fifteen years too late for you want to do this. It’s fifteen years too late for you want to save me.* “If he doesn’t want me there, I’d rather stay out of his way than start a fire for everyone else to deal with when I leave.” She had seen every form of discrimination in Boston, everything she thought she could possibly experience —she’d been tossed from a restaurant, turned away by a counselor, barred from a church, held and raped and tortured for the very ailment which had driven her away from her family in the first place. “It doesn’t bother me. I’m not offended.”
Smoke streamed out of the tailpipe of the vehicle in front of her, muddling the air. She watched the soot vanish into a pale cloud and dissipate into nothing; it served as a distraction from her mother’s sharp eyes fixed onto the side of her face. “You should be. You should be offended that anyone would ever treat you as less than anyone else.” Lana flexed her jaw. It cracked and sent pain shooting up through her ear. “You used to loathe injustice. God forbid me or your daddy should ever call a Negro a Negro, a woman a woman, or a Jew a Jew. You wanted to tell their stories and demonstrate their humanity. What the hell happened?”

Lana sighed. “I got tired, Mama,” she whispered. She glanced sideways at her; the traffic had ceased its movement, so she could spare her eyes from the road. “It’s easy when you get to opt in. When you get to decide which days you’re going to say something about a racist, sometimes you can look the other way, and nobody thinks less of you for it. If you don’t have the energy on any given day, nobody notices.” A lock of her hair fell from behind her hair in a thick, dark curtain, and she cleared her throat, shaking her head with her eyebrows inclined. “I don’t have that luxury anymore. Anywhere we go, people know who we are, and my priority is staying safe. Not sticking it to the man.”

“Don’t you think you should at least try?”

“The last time I tried to eat in a restaurant, the manager threw me in the floor and nearly ripped out Sister Mary Eunice’s hair.” Lana eased off of the brake for the car to roll forward through the copse of trees toward the highway. The bare trees swayed in the slight breeze. Dry leaves stirred from the earth and skittered around in front of them. But her mother had no answer for her. “They tried to kick me out of church—they would have, if it weren’t for a priest who knows more about God than his own ego. I’m a spectacle, and anyone who’s seen with me is a target.” They won’t even let me see Wendy’s grave. We haven’t gone back. I couldn’t if I wanted to. She swallowed the dryness which had inundated her mouth. “We do try. We try to keep our heads down.”

Her mother didn’t have an answer for her, so silence filled the gap for a spell, until they reached the pavement of the highway, and Lana turned onto the main road to point toward home. “I think you should move. Move where people don’t know your face. You’d be safer.”

“No.” I already tried that. She had done it briefly before Mary Eunice came to her, perused magazines of apartments in New York—things she doubted she could ever afford, but the house was smothering her before Mary Eunice came into her life. She could see nothing of it without Wendy’s shadow upon the wall, observing her, judging her. “We bought that house together. It’d be like throwing her away.” She almost winced as the words escaped; she hadn’t intended for them to come out. I shouldn’t talk about Wendy. That will make her feel inadequate. Lana glanced in the rearview mirror, but Mary Eunice was unfazed, gazing out the window and watching the trees fly by like a child with awe in her eyes, searching the foliage for any sign of life; Lana remembered well the fantasies she could paint, the stories she would write in her head about the birds sailing overhead or the deer haring through the woods, as a child riding home in the backseat after church.

“You can’t hold onto the past forever, Lana.”

This, however, caught Mary Eunice’s attention, and she sat up straight in the backseat, eyes narrowing, lips drawn into a flat line of distaste. Lana bit the inside of her cheek. “Right. I suppose you’ll be moving out of Daddy’s house and throwing away all of his clothes, then?” she snipped in return.

Beside her, her mother stiffened. Her teeth clicked together inside her mouth. “Duly noted. Watch your tone.” She dabbed at the corner of her nostril with the sodden handkerchief, drawing her gaze back into her own lap, but she said nothing else. Mary Eunice’s reflection gazed at Lana in the rearview mirror, a soft attention written on the curve of her lips. The children remained mute,
either not following the conversation or too confused by it to butt in their own two cents. Bruce had silent tears running down his cheeks, and Mary Eunice offered her hand to him. He placed his in her much larger palm. She wrapped her spidery, elegant fingers around his hand. He dashed away his tears and snot. *How is she so good? What made her so very perfect? She’s too good for this world.*

“Watch out!” Lana jerked her gaze back down to the road and slammed the brake, swerving to avoid the deer locked in front of the road. One of the children shrieked and pitched forward, slamming against the back of her seat. In the flash of the mirror, Mary Eunice flattened Terry to the back of the seat with one arm and caught Bruce by the back of his shirt, hauling him back up beside them. The tires squealed, and the car rocked on the grass on the side of the road, bouncing through it and flinging up stones and dirt. She skidded to a stop, parked half-way in the ditch. “Goddamn, Lana, watch the road!” The deer sailed over her car, effortless and unharmed. It cast a long look over them, eyes wide as it regarded them, just feet away from the vehicle.

Mary Eunice lifted Bruce into her lap. “Are you alright?” He bobbed his head, dashing away more of his tears with closed fists, and Terry whimpered, having begun to cry as well. “Are you hurt?” She shook her head. “Look.” Mary Eunice nudged her and pointed at the wide-eyed doe, still frozen at the side of the road and gazing at them with her big ears flopping and white tail flicking. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

Immediately, the children lost interest in their near death experience. They both clambered over her to gaze out at the deer, faces pressed almost against the glass. “I’ve never seen one so close before!” Terry glanced back at Mary Eunice. “Are they all so big? They look so much smaller when they’re just running, or when they’re on the side of the road!”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen one so close before, either.”

“Wow!” Bruce sidled up beside his sister. “She’s so pretty! Look at her eyes!” The wide eyes blinked at them, scanning the contents of the car. Then, she wheeled around on her hind legs and hared off into the forest again; she sprang into the woods without inhibition, free and alive. “Look at her go! The way she runs!” He pointed, index finger thrust against the glass. She kicked up the dry leaves in her wake before she vanished from view, brown blending in with all of the shades of the woods around her. “Cool!”

A long gust of air blew from Lana’s nose, heart still bouncing in her throat. “Are you all okay?”

Mary Eunice flashed a smile at her in the mirror, bright as the midday sun. The hammering of Lana’s heart flipped backward at the expression. *Fuck. I nearly killed us all looking at her face in the mirror, and here I am again. I don’t think this is what they meant when they said homosexuality was dangerous.* “I think we’re all just fine.” She smoothed a hand over Terry’s hair, scanning each of the children, but the deer had them so preoccupied, they hardly heard the question, both gazing out at the forest like they expected the doe to reappear and grace them with her presence again.

A soft sensation in Lana’s stomach swelled as Mary Eunice ruffled Bruce’s hair. She ripped her gaze away from the mirror and looked at her mother instead. “Are you alright?”

“You drive just like your father! Might as well have a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Staring up at the sky like we’re on the stairway to heaven or something. What’s wrong with you?” Lana didn’t answer, holding her gaze. “Yes, I’m fine. Would you take us home before something else tries to kill us?”

Lana cleared her throat where it had clogged with a nervous phlegm. “Of course.” She glanced behind her as she steered back onto the road, motor humming as she pressed a little harder on the
gas pedal. *Fate is trapping me in this car with my mother.* She bit her lower lip. “Sorry. I didn’t see it.”

“We know. You were staring up at the sky like you saw an angel.”

_I did see an angel, but she wasn’t in the sky._ Lana’s cheeks warmed. She prayed they hadn’t discolored with her embarrassment. “The clouds are pretty today,” she said instead, some addition, some defense, much as she hated to bring it up. “I was finding shapes. The deer just interrupted me.”

“We do that sometimes, too!” Terry chimed. “Mama takes us all out on the lake shore so we can fly kites and find the figures in the clouds. Mama says the big fluffy ones are the wings of angels. Right, Bruce?” The boy hummed a vague agreement. He kept his face pressed to the window, curled up in Mary Eunice’s lap and scanning the foliage for any hint of more wildlife he could spot. “Granny? Does Granddaddy have wings now?”

“I don’t know, sweetie. I think he was good enough to get wings, but it’s God’s decision, not mine.”

“Can I ask God to give him wings?”

“You can ask God whatever you like, darling.”

Lana turned right and headed down the dirt road with the fork, past the dilapidated building she had last known as a gas station. “When did Locklear’s close?” she asked. *I don’t want to think about him having wings.* Her heart sank. No one had given her enough space, enough time, to process his death. The dull pangs of grief in her stomach and chest brought tears to her eyes, but she hadn’t wept, not more than a few drops shed here and there. Approaching the house revived deja vu inside of her; she expected to see him resting on the porch, smoking a cigar, shotgun strewn across his lap just because he could.

“Oh, the old prairie nigger—”

“Mama.”

“Oh, for god’s sake. The *Indian* died, ten years ago or so. Somebody shot him over a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of beer. His daughter took over for awhile, but when Johnson came back from one of his damn Southern Baptist conventions, all his fire and brimstone talk of running off the Negroes—the *colored folk*—she got scared off. Took her family and ran for the hills. I don’t blame her a bit. You know, Johnson wasn’t always like that. Somebody’s brainwashed him to be like that. Put it in his head.”

“Why haven’t you found a different church?”

“It’s brand loyalty, Lana. His daddy buried my daddy.”

“That was almost fifty years ago.”

Lana parked off to the side, well out of the way of John’s car; he had parked crookedly in front of the porch, like he had struggled to focus on the task at hand, and Lana had a shred of pity for him. *Parking with four screaming children and a crying wife can’t be easy. Stupid bastard brought it on himself. He should’ve let Frieda get fixed when she wanted to._ Glancing sideways, she met her mother’s gaze, but before Helen could reply, the front screen door of the porch flapped open. Mary Eunice climbed out and hoisted Bruce out onto the ground, and then she turned to help tug Terry out of the long seat as well.
Cindy pedaled down the steps. Her tiny legs flipped out from under her, and she landed sprawled in the dirt, kicking up dust with the impact. A cloud floated around her. Frieda dove out of the house right behind her, but the girl scrambled up, just out of her mother’s reach, and darted away again, shrieking. “What the hell?” Lana said, as she climbed out of her car. Cindy bolted for the woods, and Frieda managed no more than a few steps before she halted, hand pressed to her forehead. “Frieda? What’s the matter?” She’s crying. The unbidden fury in Lana rose just like it had when they were children. She caught Frieda by the wrists. “What happened? What’s wrong with her?”

The floating dirt stuck to the wet spots on Frieda’s cheeks. Lana glanced over her shoulder for fear of Terry and Bruce drawing near, but Mary Eunice hung back with them, distracting them, and her mother stuck by them, remarking something on a strange-shaped stone on the ground. “It’s my goddamned husband, he’s what’s the matter with her! The way he talks to children, you’d think he doesn’t have eight of them! He doesn’t have the least bit of sensitivity at all! Not a shred! And he won’t keep his mouth shut—god damn, I hate him! Is it too late to use a condom?”

The last part would’ve elicited a chuckle from Lana if it didn’t sting so much, watching her cry, smearing away her own tears with hands covered in flour, because her grief didn’t exempt her from being a mother and she still had to cook for these children she hadn’t wanted but loved nonetheless. The child inside of her who protected her little sister wanted to wrap Frieda up in a tight hug and stuff her in the car and take her far away, back home to Boston where she could offer protection and shelter. But she couldn’t do that. She knew, even if she offered, Frieda would never accept—she couldn’t go anywhere without her children, and Lana didn’t have the space to shelter eight children, nor the funds to feed them, nor the patience to deal with them. I’m helpless. Was this the picture of what she would have become if she hadn’t had Wendy? Unwillingly wed to a man she could never love, bearing his children at his whim because she had no other choice? Her stomach flipped at the notion.

Tight arms wrapped around her, and Lana reciprocated the embrace as Frieda shoved her wet face into the crook of her neck. Her gravid middle prodded against Lana’s soft abdomen, a staunch reminder of what could have become if she had allowed it. She had no comfort she could offer. She smoothed a hand up and down Frieda’s back. “I’m sorry.” Her heart ached with those words. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here.” What could she have done if she had been here? If she had seen their wedding, or met John before it? If she had been here for Frieda to talk about her doubts after the third child? I’ll never know. Her family had chased her away, and in the process, they had robbed her and her sister of one another. Frieda muffled another sob into the crook of her neck. “Frieda, it’s okay. It’s going to be fine.” It'll be fine in twenty years when your kids are adults and you can divorce the fucker. “C’mon, let’s go inside. I’ll help you cook dinner—” Frieda hiccuped with mingled sadness and disbelief. “Okay, well, I’ll stand back and talk to you while Sister Mary Eunice helps you cook dinner.”

Frieda shook her head. “No, I’ve—I’ve gotta go find her. She could get lost, she could fall down in the creek—oh, god, she doesn’t know how to swim.” She slapped a hand to her own forehead and left a white handprint behind. “Which—Which direction did she go? Did you see?”

Pursing her lips, Lana didn’t relinquish her grip on Frieda so easily. “I think you should let Bruce and Terry go find them.” Frieda blinked in surprise at her suggestion. “Do you remember when you were five and you decided you were running away from home because you tore your favorite dress, and Mama wouldn’t fix it because you’d been playing with the church boys when you weren’t supposed to?” Frieda bobbed her head, mute at Lana’s recollection. “I went and found you. Remember?”

Smearing away her snot with the back of her hand, Frieda said, “Yeah.” Her voice cracked. “You brought me back home and snuck it away when Mama wasn’t watching and sewed it up all
crooked, and then you told me I could wear your pants if I wanted to play with the church boys so Mama and Daddy would think you had torn them, instead of me.”

“Right. Don’t say I never did anything for you.” Frieda snorted a weak, derisive burst of laughter through her nose, but she was caught on the snot clogging her nostrils. A bubble came from her nose. Lana fumbled into her purse to find her handkerchief and wiped her nose for her like a small child. “How would you have felt if Mama had stormed off into the woods and dragged you out by your ear? It wouldn’t have helped, would’ve it?” Frieda shook her head. “Let them take care of each other. They’ll make her feel better than you or John. They’re going to have each other for the rest of their lives. And they’ll certainly explain death a lot better than his insensitive ass will.”

“As she pinched the bridge of her nose, Frieda nodded. “You’re right. You’re right. Terry! Bruce! Will you come over here, please?” Both of the kids hopped up from the dirt and ran toward their mother without another consideration or hesitation. “Will you two go find your sister, please? Daddy said some things to her that weren’t very nice. I need you both to make her feel better.” Bruce’s face fell, but Terry brightened, straightening her back like a woman on a mission, called to duty and willing to serve. “Bring her back here before dinner. Stay together, alright? And stay away from the creek and the property line. She can’t have gone very far.”

Terry grinned and saluted. “Yes, Mama! C’mon, Brucie.” She grabbed her brother by the wrist, ignoring his peeved expression, irritated that Frieda had dared to ask something of him other than playing. Typical boy. Expects the girls to do all the hard work while he has no responsibilities. Lana bit her tongue. Frieda was raising her sons to be like their father, like all of the men in this area—like all men in general. She was raising controlling people who would treat their wives as their personal wombs and homemakers, just like John treated Frieda. And there’s not a damn thing she can do about it. She can’t even convince him to let her stop producing children by the dozen. The two children charged off into the wood, their silhouettes fading into the woods, overtaken by the tree trunks.

Helen and Mary Eunice approached, a certain distance between them; Mary Eunice kept her gaze cast downward, cheeks a rosy shade of pink, and she didn’t look at the older woman for more than a moment or two at a time before she averted her eyes again. She’s not a very good liar. Or secret-keeper. Or whatever it is we’re doing. She flanked Lana, hovering close beside her but not touching her. They didn’t have the freedom for that. Lana looked up at her soft blue eyes, sharing a tender gaze where she could not offer a squeezed hand or a kiss. “I’m fine, Mama,” Frieda sniffled, obligation rather than truth. “It’s just John. Like normal.” Narrowing her eyes, she replied, “Remember. We’re Baptists.”

“We don’t get divorced. We die.”

“That’s right.” Helen gathered up her purse and dabbed at her own nose, heading up the porch steps and into the house without another look back at them.

The screen door slammed shut behind her. Frieda covered her face with one hand. “I’m stuck. That’s just it. I’m stuck with him. For the rest of my life. Oh my god, I can’t believe this. I fucked up, I just fucked up, Daddy told me it was a mistake! He told me I didn’t love that boy and I married him anyway and now I’ve got eight kids!” She ripped away from Lana and began to pace back and forth across the lawn, kicking up dust with every step. “What am I going to do? I can’t believe I got myself into this mess.”

Mary Eunice tiptoed after her. “You can come with us.” She looked back to Lana, her eyes wide with the heart-wrenching question. “She can come with us, can’t she?”

Sniffling like a small child, Frieda paused, arms crossed around her chest. She shivered, lowering
her head. “I’ve got eight kids,” she repeated in a small, dull whisper. Mary Eunice approached from behind her and offered a single arm. Frieda folded herself into the hug. “I can’t leave them. I can’t take them with me, either. I can’t raise them without a father—I can’t get a job, I don’t have any skills. They’d starve without him.”

Brows quirking, Mary Eunice kept her held close. “But if you don’t love him…”

“I do love him. I’m not in love with him. And I don’t think I ever was, or I ever will be.” Mary Eunice used the sleeve of her habit to wipe Frieda’s face clean. “I love him because I love my kids, and—and that’s my job, but goddamn, I see why Mama was so angry all the time when we were little! It’s hard not to hate him sometimes! And Daddy was a better daddy than John is. Daddy always made time for us—he always wanted to play catch or have tea party or some stupid shit. I can barely get John to change a diaper or warm up a bottle, let alone cook! I know he loves them, but he doesn’t act like it. He doesn’t act like he loves anyone at all. He just says it and hopes we believe it.”

Lana put her other arm around Frieda’s back. “Daddy did the same thing when we were kids. You know he did. The older we got, the worse it got. The drinking—the barbiturates.”

“Oh, John isn’t like that.” Frieda shook her head. “He’d never do anything like that. He’s just a man, and I—I’m tired. I’m just tired. I need to rest. I’ll feel better tomorrow.” She combed her greasy hair back out of her face with her hands.

“You’re allowed to feel things,” Lana murmured, frowning as she sought eye contact from Frieda. “You’re not a bad person for feeling things. You know that, right?”

“Yes, Lana—look, no. No. I’m the wife. That’s all I am. I’m the wife and my only job is to love and support my husband. So, no. Don’t come here with your weird yankee liberal ideas of happiness and freedom. I’m just the wife. I vote in every election, I go to church, I feed my kids, and that’s all I have to do. So you don’t get to tell me it’s okay for me not to love him, because you’re wrong. I have to love him.”

Mary Eunice pursed her lips, and over the top of Frieda’s head, she sought eye contact, uncertain how to address Frieda. Lana hesitated, as well. She’s pregnant and hormonal. And she’s always had a volatile temper. “You don’t owe him anything,” Mary Eunice said. “Anyone who tells you that is wrong.” Frieda glowered at her, brown eyes hot as coals, but Mary Eunice amended, “I just think you should talk to him, seriously, about how you feel. He loves you. Men just show it differently than women do.” She said it nicer than I would have. Lana bit her tongue. Her cynicism regarding a man’s capability of loving a woman adequately wouldn’t help Frieda with her marriage. “Sleep on it. Think about it. If you’re not happy, your children won’t be, either.”

Frieda sighed, biting her lip, but she nodded. “You’re right. You’re right.” She crossed her arms, averting her eyes down to the ground. “I don’t know why it took me this long to realize I was unhappy. Goddamn, Lana, I was fine until you came back around.” In spite of her accusatory words, a small, sad smile bloomed on her lips. She swatted Lana on the upper arm with an open palm. “You make my standards too high!”

“I know, I’m just the plague.” Lana tugged her close and pressed a tender kiss to her temple. “C’mon. Let’s go inside. I’ll make John help you with dinner.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I can and I will. I’m writing a cooking column in Boston, and if I can learn how to put something on the stove without igniting my own hair, anyone can.” Lana nudged her back up the stairs so she headed inside, Mary Eunice right behind them, slamming the screen door shut behind them.
after she gave Gus a scratch to his ears. He watched the people enter the house, but he didn’t try to barge after them. He sprawled out, all content, across the porch.

John, likewise, had sprawled out on the couch with Rex in his lap. The twins played side by side in the floor with cornhusk dolls. “Hey, Frieda, do you really think it’s a good idea for Stuart to be playing with Sue’s dolls like that? I’d hate for him to have some kind of backward type thing going on when he gets older just because of his twin sister. What else do you think he could use instead? We could pick him up some Matchbox cars for Christmas.”

“I think the doll won’t hurt him.” Frieda paused, and she glanced to Lana for support before she asked, “What do you want for supper?”

“Oh, anything you want to make is fine. Take a break, honey. I know you’ve had a long day.” He had his ear pressed to the speaker of the radio, waving off her question about food the moment he heard it. “Hey—they’re calling a truce in Vietnam for the holiday. I bet those communists don’t keep it for a minute. Bet they shoot up as many of our guys as they can. Wouldn’t put anything past them, now.” He chuckled. “Your mama went down for a nap. I think she doesn’t feel too hot. Don’t blame her.”

Frieda bit her lip at his quick dismissal. “Well, actually, I was thinking, maybe, you could help me.” He looked back up to her, eyes wide with surprise, scanning her—trying to identify which part of her needed help. “Help me cook supper,” she clarified. “So I don’t have to cook for ten by myself anymore.”

“Oh.” John blinked in surprise, boyish face taken aback by her request. His eyes moved to Lana, but where she expected to find an accusation—some entitled boy pissed she had dared tell her sister to assert herself and make herself more than a slave—she saw only concern, genuine concern. “Of course. Whatever you need, sweetheart.” He flicked off the switch of the radio and left it on the end table. “Don’t go too far, though. I’ll burn the roof off of this building if you give me the chance.”

“Don’t worry. I know how to babysit a bad cook, thanks to Lana.”

“Firestarting is an acquired talent,” Lana snipped.

They all laughed. Her heart settled at his amiability. Maybe it’s not so bad. He seems like a good guy. Willing to change. His big eyes followed Frieda’s face with so much adoration, as much love as Gus used when he looked at her—as much love as Mary Eunice used, so much that she blushed. Frieda didn’t reciprocate his wide-eyed awe, but under his touch, she eased, the tension rolling out of her shoulders and her middle protruding more, less slouched over. She doesn’t need to run away. I think they can be happy. Mary Eunice took some salmon out of the can and began to roll it in tight balls like Frieda instructed, and Lana sidled up beside her; she trusted herself to handle the salmon, far away from any grease or flame. Frieda poured a huge bag of beans into a pot and a bag of greens into another, and she gave John a long wooden spoon and specific instructions to look out for.

“Where did the kids run off to?” he asked as he stirred the boiling kale.

“I sent them to find Cindy. I thought it was better for them to help her than for me to drag her out of the woods. They understand better.”

“That is a good idea. Will they be back before supper’s done?”

“They should be. She can’t have gone far.”
Forty-five minutes later, Mary Eunice finished setting the table, and Helen headed up the hall with a horrible case of bedhead, brunette locks all bedraggled and exhausted eyes bloodshot from the silent tears she had shed in the privacy of her own room where she knew her family wouldn’t intrude. “Timothy and Roger said they would come by for supper,” she said, voice hoarse. “They had to swing by the police station. What’re we eating?”

John grinned. “We’re having salmon, greens, butter beans, and macaroni n cheese, Mrs. Winters.”

She inclined an eyebrow at Lana in the kitchen. “How much of it is edible?”

“I’m so glad to hear of your faith in my cooking abilities,” Lana quipped. “It’s all edible. I just rolled the salmon balls. No heat involved.”

“Lana, sweetheart, you never had any cooking abilities. You’re the only girl I’ve ever known who failed home economics for setting the school kitchen on fire.” John ogled at her at the revelation; Lana avoided his gaze. It wasn’t that bad, she wanted to argue, but she knew better; time hadn’t twisted her mother’s memory, and she didn’t care for Mary Eunice to hear any of her embarrassing stories from high school. “It was the only class you ever failed, actually.”

The screen door burst open, Bruce scrambling into the living room and tripping over a corn husk doll with Cindy right behind him, short legs frantic and failing to keep stride with her older brother’s. “Mama! Daddy!” he bleated. Frieda almost dropped her spatula. “Mama, we lost Terry! We can’t find her nowhere!”

“What do you mean, you lost her? I told you to stay together.”

Under her stern gaze, Bruce flopped back onto his bottom and flipped his head back, bleating a long wail, and Cindy’s red-streaked face crumpled, already wet from tears. “She said it would be faster if we went different ways! And I found Cindy, but—but Terry’s gone, she’s just gone, we looked everywhere!”

“I don’t want Terry to go to heaven…” Cindy sniffled hard and whimpered.

John scooped her up into his arms. “Don’t be silly. Terry’s not going to heaven. Here, you two—you two get to eat supper, alright? Uncle Tim and Roger will be here, soon, and we’ll go look for her. I’m sure she’s just fine.” He kissed her right on the tip of the nose. “C’mon, flower, let me make you a plate. You, too, Brucie.”

Wide-eyed, Frieda fumbled in the empty air before she placed her spatula back on the counter. “We’ve got to go look for her—I’ve got to go look for her—she might’ve fallen down in the creekbed and can’t climb out—” Helen placed a hand on her forearm to silence her. “Mama,” Frieda whispered, small as a child seeking guidance once again. “I told her to go. I told her to go looking for Cindy—oh my god—”

“No. You stay here.” A motor rumbled outside in the driveway. “That’s Tim and Roger. You stay here. Make sure the kids all eat. The rest of us will split up and scour the woods until we find her. She’s probably just tangled up in some ivy.”

“It’s going to be dark soon—oh my god, she’s got to be so scared—”

Helen snorted. “You hit the panic button pretty damn fast. Kids are kids. They do stupid things. She’s just fine, wherever she is. I promise you.” She glanced back at Lana and Mary Eunice. “C’mon, both of you—John, none of your kids eat portions that big. Hurry up.”

They intercepted Timothy and Roger at the front door. “We’re not eating!” Helen snapped. “We’re finding Terry. She’s somewhere out in the woods. Teams of two—I don’t trust you two
together.” She nodded to the twins. “God forbid Timothy should push someone else into the creek.” He flushed, but he didn’t argue; no one had the sense to mention a debate to Helen in her element like this. “Timothy, you go with Sister Mary Eunice. You need extra prayer to keep you in line. John, stay with Roger, and I’m going with Lana. Three different directions. Roger and John toward the Abernathy land, Timothy and Sister Mary Eunice toward Peyser land, we’re heading toward Shelton land. Fan out and work your way back in. She’s gotta be stuck somewhere, so look for ditches and tricky undergrowth she could’ve gotten tangled up in. Is everyone clear?”

The strategizing, laid out so quickly and without question by the Winters matriarch, left everyone with gaping mouths, but they all bobbed their heads in mute agreement. “Great. Meet back here in an hour—preferably with a little girl.”

Lana gave Mary Eunice one last sad, long look before her mother’s eyes caught onto the side of her face. She separated us on purpose. Flames burned inside of her stomach, furious at the ridiculous interference. She doesn’t trust me to look for Terry if I’m with Mary Eunice. She pinched her eyes closed tight. I can’t argue with her. But god, if I don’t hate her meddling hands in my affairs. Timothy caught Mary Eunice by the elbow and tugged her away, and Lana turned away, following her mother into the outline of trees just beyond the yard, uttering a silent prayer for someone to find Terry unharmed quickly so she could end this nightmare without Mary Eunice sooner.
The forest parted around Lana, where she moved through it with her head down and stomach rumbling. *That was a stupid idea, telling Frieda to make the kids do it. It was stupid. They’re just kids.* She bit the inside of her lip, arms loosely crossed in front of her chest through her sweater. How had her good idea gone so very wrong? *Can I not have a moment’s peace while I’m here?* She swallowed the heat which began to bloom in the back of her throat. The birds overhead added a choir to the chaos in her mind—again, she found herself trapped beside her mother with no one else to add any padding between the two of them. “You were always the best at hiding when you were her age,” her mother said offhandedly. “Where would you have gone?”

“I would’ve jumped in the creek and squeezed into one of the crevices under the lichen.” *That isn’t an option now. There’s no way out of the creek. She must know that.* “Do you honestly think she’s just hiding from us? Her siblings, too?” Lana’s heart skipped a beat at the alternative, hurt or dead or lost or trapped or any combination of those, alone in the forest without her family, all because Lana had suggested Frieda experiment with hands-off parenting. *Hands-off parenting gets you lost kids.*

“I don’t know. Terry isn’t the type. But she’s been through a lot today. Maybe she found a pile of moss and fell asleep. You did that once.”

“It’s awfully cold to be sleeping outside.” The breeze rattled the tree trunks, and Lana approached the hollow beneath a fallen tree and peeked into the cave of soil below. Only the skeleton of a raccoon glared back up at her, tattered mats of fur clinging to the bleached bones. “Gross,” she muttered, stepping back, away from the trunk of the tree. She slid over the round trunk and plopped on the other side of it, shoes sinking into the mud and rotting autumn leaves.

Her mother held out a hand. “Help me. I’m a little old widow.” Lana took it with a tiny smile cracking her ceramic facade, not reaching her eyes.

“I never wanted her to be a widow. I’m—Well, I’m officially available again.”

Lana’s brow quirked. “Are you going to start dating?” *It’s none of my business.* Still, the prospect of seeing her mother with anyone other than her father sent her belly wriggling into a bunch of strange nerves. She helped her cross the thick diameter of the tree trunk, a hand on her waist, lowering her to the earth on the other side.

“Lordy, no. One man was enough for a lifetime. You get the benefit of being attracted to women, who are typically tolerable human beings. I’ve never met a man who could do the first thing to provide for himself, and I’m too set in my ways to start coddling a new bachelor.” Helen paused, and then she cast Lana a sideways glance. “No offense.” Lana shrugged. *What about that would I find offensive, anyway? That men are gross? I find no fault there. Besides, the only available men in the area are Pastor Johnson and Fred Peyser. Reprehensible fools.* Helen touched down on the other side of the fallen tree trunk. She waded through the pool of fallen leaves. This chunk of land didn’t have trails like the others Lana had traversed as a child; it had grown over, leaving
nothing intact, so they wandered through the barren landscape, a winter wonderland with no snow, only overcast sky in the background.

“They’re hardly good-looking enough for you, anyway.” Lana stuffed her hands into her pockets, paying no heed to the way the undergrowth grabbed her skirt. With the cool weather, she trusted no snakes lay underfoot for her to trample on by mistake. “Then again, I suppose John somehow managed to get Frieda…”

Helen snorted. “John managed to create eight heathens with Frieda. He did well enough. A skinny face will only harm a man so much if he has a pure heart.” She picked up a long branch and used it to poke around in a large gopher hole, stirring up some of the old, wet leaves. A stench rose from below. As she drew it back, the festering corpse of another raccoon peered out from the gopher hole. “Ew. There must be something killing them. Killing, but not eating. Hm. Strange.” She looked back up at Lana. “What do you know about John, anyway? If you don’t like men, you can’t know what’s attractive.”

Jesus. Lana resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “I’m not attracted to flowers, either, Mama, but I can still tell you which ones I think are pretty.” She caught onto a low-hanging branch of an old oak tree and braced herself against it, tiptoeing down into the ravine. “Stay up here. I don’t want you to get stuck.” I can just imagine the outrage if I lost Mama in the ravine while everyone else was trying to find Terry. More drama is just what we need. They hadn’t had a peaceful moment since arriving, though Lana couldn’t remember if life had always been like this, or if it had become worse since her return.

The branch swayed under her weight where she tugged it down, and she followed it to its length. At the base of the ravine, buried behind thick bare branches just out of sight, two logs had collapsed on top of each other, creating a deep crevice marred by lichen draped over it. Ah, hell. “Do you see anything?” Helen called from the top of the ravine.

“There’s a hollow under another tree. I’ll be right back.” Lana released the oak branch. It snapped back. She skidded to the base of the ravine sideways, one hand on the earth, kicking up streaks of mud under her shoes and gathering a handful of discarded leaves. We’re going to have a million ticks by the time we get out of here. “Terry?” she called, hoisting herself up on another sapling. The earth beneath her squelched with moisture. “It’s like a swamp down here.” Kicking some leaves out of the way, Lana sought the driest places to place her feet. A shallow puddle left one foot sodden. “Ew,” she grunted again.

Movement whipped the lichen in front of the crevice Lana had spotted. She jerked her head up. The muscles in her shoulders tensed. Don’t be stupid. It was just the wind. But the cool winter air hung still over her. Each time she lifted her foot, it thwacked with suction from leaving the soil. A cold chill trickled up her spine, raising all of the hairs on the back of her neck, like a million eyes raked over her form. Someone—something—was watching her. It is not. You’re just paranoid. “Terry?” she called again, but this time, she struggled to put air to her voice. Her vocal cords closed up in a last ditch effort to keep her quiet and out of sight. But the dead undergrowth crackled as she waded through it. The noise set her apart and planted a target on her back. Her heart quickened, trampling over itself and skipping beats. Her palms slicked with sweat. Every synapse ordered her to turn back, to run away, to flee and escape the sights of an unseen gun.

She remained fixed on the spot. The lichen stirred again, but no wind shifted her hair or teased the back of her neck. There’s something there. “Terry?” she croaked. The toad-like quality of her own voice shocked her, but she couldn’t linger on the thought; her eyes froze on the entrance to the crevice. It might be her. She might be hurt. Swallowing the hard lump in her throat, Lana tiptoed forward, choking on her own lacking valor. “Terry, is that you?” Squealch. Her shoe sucked up from the earth. Splat. She replaced it in the next puddle. Mud spittle flecked all over her
ankles. A briar bush snagged onto her skirt and tore tiny holes in it. The dry branch of the thorny bush splintered off and clung to her clothing.

The trees thickened around the hollow beneath the two fallen logs, propped up on one another. The lichen whistled like beads draped in a door frame. “Terry?” Lana dropped into a squat, peering into the dark crook. Her blood raced, cold and quick, through her veins, urging her to swing around and run while she could. Her tongue, a sponge, leached her mouth of all fluid. She extended a hand, fingers parted, and brushed the lichen aside to peek into a den.

A large paw flashed out with silvery claws extended. Lana scrambled back, jerking her hand out of reach. She landed flat on her ass, a few feet away. “Oof!” The bobcat exhaled a fiery hiss. Both of its moon-like eyes glowed up at her, and it prowled out of the den with its stubby tail flicking, ears pricked. “Oh, shit.” Lana backpedaled on all fours, hands sinking into the muck and leaving prints behind. She propelled herself with her legs in a crooked crabwalk. “Shit, shit, shit.” The bobcat’s nostrils flared at her. A low growl budded in its throat. Lana’s back struck the trunk of tree. “No!” She slurped in a deep breath. What do I do? “Leave me alone!”

Her shriek carried through the trees with a broken reverberation. The bobcat froze in its tracks. Lana scraped her back as she stood right against the tree trunk. “Leave me alone!” It jerked its head at her shrill address. “Go away!” With the third shout, it wheeled around on its hind legs and hared off into the trees. Lana whirled after it, only to slam right into her mother. “Ah!” she yelped.

Helen caught her by the shoulders. “What the hell is going on? What are you yelling at? What’s down here? Are you okay?” Lana blinked a few times, eyes filled with tears, struggling to keep from shedding them. A calloused, weathered hand caressed her cheek. She flinched. “Lana? What’s the matter? What happened?”

Tongue flapping, jaw loose, Lana lost control of her voice. The first few sounds she produced were a series of broken croaks. Each one made her mother’s brow quirk deepen. “I saw a—a—there was a buh-bobcat.” Lana cleared her throat and gulped the dryness in her mouth. “It was just a bobcat.” Her fingers trembled. She stuffed her hands back in her pockets and balled them into sharp fists to minimize the shaking. “It must be what’s killing the raccoons.”

“Did it attack you? Bobcats aren’t like that. They usually avoid people. It could be sick.”

Lana shook her head. “I’d attack someone who stuck their head in my house without an invitation. It was just protecting its den. I had it cornered.” She shivered and sucked in a deep breath through her nose. It stuck and snorted in places; the terror had caused her nose to run. “We should—We should get out of here, so it can go back into hiding. Terry’s not here, anyway.”

Shuffling past her mother, Lana kept her gaze on the ground on front of her, but Helen remained behind. “Are you sure?” She paused mid-step. “It might have attacked her. Bobcats aren’t picky. They’ll eat anything.”

Belly flipping, Lana licked the front of her teeth. “I—I doubt it.” Oh, god, what if I got Frieda’s kid eaten? She stuck her thumb into her fist and squeezed until the knuckle popped. “The kids headed off to the other side of the land, where Tim and Sister Mary Eunice went. I don’t think she would’ve made her way over here to look for Cindy. And bobcats are solitary. I only saw that one because it couldn’t get away.” Frieda would never forgive her if they couldn’t find Terry. I’ll never forgive myself. Me and my bright ideas. Let’s just break into the loony bin and send the kids off to get eaten by the wolves. God, fuck me. “Let’s—Let’s head back up the ravine. If we sweep it to the road and back, we should have a good idea that she isn’t here.”

The soil of the ravine was slick, sending them sliding backward with each foot they placed
forward. Lana reached back and caught her mother by the arm, dragging her up alongside her, leaving streaks and handprints in the dirt behind. The red clay stuck to their palms. As Lana dusted off her hands on her skirt, she left behind streaks on the fabric. “Are you sure you’re okay?” Helen asked her again. Lana bobbed her head. “It scared me to death when I heard you scream like that. You never used to scream when you were little.”

“It’s an acquired skill.” Lana rose from her knees at the top of the ravine and offered a hand to tug Helen to her feet.

At the peak of the hill, the breeze tickled her again, combing through her hair and kissing her forehead like Mary Eunice’s tender lips. Her mother’s eyes softened. “I’m sorry, Lana.” I don’t want your pity. Lana bit her tongue. “You know, if you want to talk about anything, I’m here. I’m your mama. It’s my job to listen to you.” Gritting her teeth in the silence, Lana dug her nails into the palms of her hand, sweeping the surrounding area for any sign of a hole or hollow tree that Terry could’ve used for shelter. “I know you don’t have any good reason to trust me. I understand. But I—I love you. I want to help you the best I can.”

With a measured sigh, Lana loosened her tight fists in her pockets. “I love you, too, Mama.” I never thought I’d say those words again. They didn’t roll off of her tongue with the ease she had used as a child. As a child, she had known her love without question and without regret. Now, she doubted every emotion toward her family; wariness perverted the way she saw her own mother, waiting to be tossed out the door again and bracing herself so the blow didn’t hurt as badly.

“There’s nothing to talk about. I’m fine. I’m dealing with it.” She poked under the roots of another tree, though the gaps were too small for Terry to fit under them. “Your room shares a wall with mine. I heard you dreaming last night. Moaning, like you were in pain. It woke me up.”

“That wasn’t me. That was Sister Mary Eunice.” Lana plucked at the sleeves of her sweater. “She has her own scars and skeletons in the closet.” She has her own demons to overcome. Demons plagued both of their lives, both literal and figurative, leaving them naked and vulnerable only to one another, the only other people who understood. “I talked to her on the way to the cemetery. She said she was fine.” But goddamn, if it doesn’t kill me that I can’t hold her through her nightmares. I promised myself to her, and I can’t even touch her without people looking at us the wrong way.

“Do you have dreams like that?”

“Sometimes.” Once a week like clockwork. “Not often.” The lie didn’t burn as much as she expected it to, though her off-hand tone earned her a skeptical look from her mother. She cleared her throat and amended, “I have a dog and Mary Eunice. They make it easier to handle.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest, stuffing her hands into the crooks of her elbows. The barren landscape, nothing but trees with white trunks and branches, held nothing out of the ordinary. Save for the creaking of the trunks swaying in the breeze, the forest was silent. “And I have medication, when nothing else helps.”

Sharp eyes landed on her back. “You know what kinds of problems your father had.”

“I know. Believe me, Mary Eunice really had to cajole me—Sister Mary Eunice.” I wasn’t convinced until I wet my pants in front of my three best friends. Nothing motivates a girl like that. “It’s not morphine. It’s an anti-anxiety. I don’t take it often.” Still more often than I would like. As they shuffled onward, the dry leaves collected under their feet. “I’ve got enough help. I’m fine.”

The prickling sensation on the back of her neck, the telltale indicator of her mother’s gaze on her, didn’t fade, and Lana glanced sideways at her. “What’s that girl’s deal? And what’s your deal
with her?”

Lana’s heart skipped a beat. *Don’t say anything. Don’t be stupid.* She sucked on her lower teeth. “She’s a nun. Briarcliff wasn’t a good place for anyone. The Mother Abbess, the head nun, decided she needed a few months of spiritual therapy to recover from some of the things she saw at Briarcliff. The abbey was dissolved, so I offered to keep her until she was able to return to a new place of service.”

“She doesn’t look at you like a nun.” *No, she doesn’t. She’s transparent. She wears everything on her sleeve.* Lana held her posture stiff, refusing to let herself betray anything of their relationship. “She looks at you the way a girl always wants a man to look at her. Those big, worshiping eyes. She’d be a good nun if you were God.”

Sometimes she acts like I am God. Involuntary pink blush tickled Lana’s cheeks. A cold wind whipped through the trees; she prayed it excused the sudden color on her face. “That’s just how she looks. She worships the world. She does everything with great love.” Lana wrung her hands. “She believes if she pours all of herself into the universe, the universe will give her more to offer. A love like that doesn’t have a certain look.”

Helen sniffed, unconvinced by Lana’s attempt at giving Mary Eunice another label. “But you like her.”

“She’s a good friend. I don’t have many of those anymore. I’m not in any position to be picky.” *Please, just leave it alone.* This wasn’t what Lana wanted to discuss with her mother. But the dark eyes, the ones she had inherited, didn’t leave her, and she knew she had more explanation to offer. “Sometimes there are days when nothing looks bright anymore. Mary Eunice helps me remember that there is still sunlight. But it isn’t like what you think.” *She is the sunlight. I call her sunshine because that’s what she is. And it's more like what you think than I ever hoped it would become.*

This gave Helen pause. “I’m not judging you.” *Why do I feel like you're lying?* Lana bit her tongue. “I don’t understand, but I don’t have to understand. If she helps you, that’s what matters.” The trees parted into a large clearing with tin foil wrappings littering the ground, an old bonfire pit cold and pale from months of disuse. “Ugh.” Helen kicked one of the wrappers across the ground. “We had people sneaking down here and shooting up to keep away from the cops. Pulled up some pot plants. Your daddy was gonna come down here and clean up, but he never got the chance.” She grabbed a few pieces of tin foil and wadded them up in one another. Under the leaves, a rusty syringe peeked up at Lana. She picked it up. “One day, he was fine, and the next he was on a drip. Within days.” Her voice became more stringent and thin. “I know a lot of people don’t get a warning. But watching him go like that made me wish it would’ve been faster. Something quick. A heart attack. A car accident. It killed me, watching him suffer. Kills me now that he didn’t have a shred of dignity left. That we had to watch him become that. He never would’ve wanted any of us to remember him that way.”

Lana averted her eyes, remaining silent; she stared down at the rusty needle in her hand, its brittle texture between her fingers. *That way was the only way he ever loved me. That way is the only memory I have.* She dropped it into her pocket, hoping it wouldn’t stab her through the fabric of her skirt, and she bit the tip of her tongue. Her mother glanced at her, eyes broken and filled to the brim with tears. “Is it easier to not know? For it to be fast?”

Swallowing the dry lump in her throat, Lana rolled her tongue through the stickiness of her saliva. Her nose ran from unshed tears. She rubbed it with the back of her hand, catching each drop of snot and smearing it away. “I don’t know.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest, which ached. *I don’t want to talk about this.* She remembered Wendy best at home, with Mary Eunice and Gus, comforted by arms around her where she could weep and mourn without judgment and without fear of losing herself in the bottomless pit of her own sadness. “I don’t know that it was
fast. I don’t know how long he had her before he got me.” *I just know that, for whatever amount of time he had her, she was afraid, and she was worried about me. That she knew she was going to die and nobody was ever going to free me and I would never know what had happened to her.*

“There’s nothing easy about losing your soulmate, ever.”

Perhaps she could’ve changed her answer if Wendy had left her differently. If she had keeled over from a heart attack, or if she had died in a car accident, or even if she was shot once and the mortician could confirm she died immediately—Lana could see all of those solutions as preferable to what she faced now, knowing Wendy hadn’t suffered much. *I would never stop grieving if she had a brain aneurysm, let alone anything else.* “All I know is what he told me, and I don’t know how much of it was true.” She dabbed away at the corners of her eyes. The tears refused to stop budding, and her tongue refused to stop moving. “He burned her body—with the other r-remains he had. After I escaped. So no one could tell me anything, if it was quick, if she had suffered, or how long he had kept her there before—before he caught me. In the freezer.” She bit her lip, trying to keep from saying more, uncertain how much she wanted her mother to know. Some part of her still didn’t trust anyone here; they didn’t deserve her trust. But saying it all to someone who knew nothing felt good.

A soft arm looped around her waist, and Helen tugged her close. Lana hesitated before she wrapped her arm around her mother’s body in turn. “Nobody is supposed to go through the things you went through.” They were the same height, now—it wasn’t like when she was a child, when she could burrow herself into the soft crevices of her mother’s body and find comfort there. But the smell was the same. “I’m sorry. You’re right. There’s nothing easy about any of this.” She lowered her head. A few shameful tears escaped and slid down her cheeks, but she didn’t pull away to wipe them away. “I want you to know I love you. Your daddy was heartbroken that you weren’t here. And I would be doing him a disservice if you ever forgot that we love you, that I love you. We always did. We just went about it in all the wrong ways.”

“Mama…” *I can forgive, but I can’t forget. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forget.* “I know all that. It’s just hard to talk about.” She shoved her other hand into her pocket, balled into a tight fist to keep from wringing uselessly. “I’ve spent every moment of my life trying to hide how I felt about Wendy. Keeping her a secret. I wasn’t allowed to love her when she was alive, and I’m not allowed to mourn now that she’s gone.” In the distance, the road hummed with a motor. *We’re almost at the property line.* Lana swept the landscape, but the flat ground and even trees left no hiding places for a small child to have ducked away from them, out of sight. “I have to unlearn so much hate for myself to talk about her. To you, especially. I lived so long being angry because—that was easier than facing the hurt, knowing that I was a disappointment to everyone here.” Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted her mother’s lips trembling, crystal tears mirroring her own, and her heart crumbled with despair. “I’m not angry anymore—or, I don’t want to be—but I have to learn to let go. That’s hard.”

Some part of Lana kept whispering that they didn’t deserve it, none of them; it told her she had come here to keep a dying man from leaving the earth with guilt on his conscience, not to build bridges or make amends or forgive anyone who had wronged her. “If you held it against me for the rest of my life, I would deserve it. I’m blessed that you’ve been so forgiving.”

“You still aren’t okay with it, are you?” Below her hand, the muscles in her mother’s back shifted, shoulder blades drawing together with tension. “If I brought a woman here for you to meet her. Or even if I told you more about Wendy, it would make you uncomfortable.”

“Lana, I—” She reconsidered her words and stopped in the middle of her sentence. Tongue darting across her lips, her voice softened. “I have a lot to learn, too. And some part of me will always—always hope for something different. But I love you, and I want to be in your life as much as you’ll have me.”
“I know.” I already brought a woman here for you to meet her. You just don’t know it. Lana licked her upper lip with a considerate sigh. “I can tell you there’s no point hoping, but I know I can’t change your mind. And I know you’ll keep praying to change me.” Mary Eunice never prayed to change me. Mary Eunice prayed for the wisdom to be my friend, and she found it inside of herself. “I can’t change what I am. I know it’s imperfect to you—”

“I didn’t say imperfect!”

“No, but you mean it, don’t you?” Lana held her gaze, both of them with watery eyes. “You mean that I’m not what you wanted for me, so I’m not right.”

“Lana… I don’t want to fight over this.”

“I’m not going to fight. Believe me, it’s beating a dead horse to fight for someone to accept you. I know that better than anybody. I just want you to be honest with me.”

“I do accept you!” At Lana’s skeptical look, she hesitated, and then she amended, “It’s hard. You’ve had your whole life to come to terms with this, with who you are. It’s new to me.”

“It’s been fifteen years, Mama,” Lana answered patiently.

She gaped for a moment, but then her jaws snapped shut, and she said nothing else, lowering her gaze to the forest floor and separating her arm from around Lana’s middle. Maybe I’m being too hard on her. Lana shuffled ahead through the dead leaves. The trees thinned out at the road ahead; through the trunks, she could see the red clay stretched out before them. Lana stepped across a mop of dead briar bushes and a rusted, crumbling barbed wire fence to the edge of the ditch.

From the ditch, a stench of rot rose up. “Ugh.” She covered her nose with one hand. The sickly sweet odor on her tongue made her belly flip. Trash littered the ditch, mostly bottles and cans. “Watch out. There’s glass.” She stepped over the shattered neck of a bottle and tiptoed down the line of the ditch of the dirt road. The rotting carcass of a squirrel gazed up at her with terrified desperation written deep in its wide eyes. Blood had spattered on its exposed teeth, now stained brown where the teeth had begun to fall from its jawbone, loosened by the rot and the exposure to the elements. Don’t puke, don’t puke, don’t puke— Lana gagged and whirled around, slamming headfirst into her mother. She doubled over in the hedges. Eyes stinging, the bile burning the back of her throat surged upward. Her empty stomach echoed its pity with painful contractions, spewing up acid.

Gentle hands gathered up her hair and tugged it back out of her face. “Take it easy. It’s okay.” Short fingernails raked over her scalp, twisting her hair into locks like she intended to braid it. “Breathe, baby, it’s okay.” Baby. Lana choked on her next heave. Snot streamed out of her nose and over her lips. Her mother wiped it away with her sleeve. “Are you alright?”

“Don’t call me that.” The croaked words emerged in a gasp. Her stinging eyes relieved themselves as she blinked, tilting her head back, trying to decide if the nausea had faded enough for her to stand, or if she risked vomiting on herself—or worse, on her mother. Already pissed in Mary Eunice’s habit. Might as well puke on Mama.

“Call you what? Baby?”

Lana cringed and nodded. “Please.”

“Alright, whatever you say.” A soft hand smoothed over her sweaty forehead, tugging her hair back out of her eyes. “It’s just roadkill. What’s gotten you in such a knot?”
Smearing away her tears with the backs of her hands, Lana shook her head. “Not—Not the roadkill. Its teeth. Its teeth are falling out.” *I might never go to the dentist again.* She swallowed the sticky, bitter flavor inside of her mouth to keep from spewing again. “Fuck, I’m a wreck.”

Her mother kicked some leaves over the dead animal while Lana averted her eyes. “You said it. Not me.” Still, she placed a hand on the small of Lana’s back. “It’s okay. Take a deep breath. Your hands are shaking.” *My whole body is shaking.* Lana’s jaw trembled. She tucked her tongue deep in the back of her mouth to keep from biting it. The recommended deep breath didn’t come to her as easily as she would’ve liked. *I need a Valium.* She’d left her purse at home with the medication inside it, well-hidden from any of her family’s old-fashioned ideas about her mental health. “Are you okay?”

Lana bobbed her head. *I need Mary Eunice. I need my dog.* “I—I’m fine. It’ll pass soon.” *If it doesn’t get worse.* She blew a long breath out through her mouth and tried to take her mind to a more peaceful place. In her mind, Mary Eunice gathered her up in her long arms and clutched her close and whispered sweet nothings to her ear in her low, croaking voice. A welcome hand combed through her hair while a body rocked beneath her, warm and humming with a heartbeat so strong, Lana made it the rhythm section of her life. She sucked in another breath through her nose and let it fan from her mouth. Another figure pressed up against her back in the bed of her mind, breasts firm against her shoulder blades, arm looped around her abdomen, face buried in her hair, and the scent of Wendy’s perfume which Lana had washed from her clothing but would never forget washed over her.

The next few breaths she took came more steadily. Her mother’s hand on her back smoothed up and down, laying out the wrinkles on her sweater. “C’mon. We should go back to the house. It’s starting to get dark. We’ll need flashlights if no one has found her yet. Let’s just follow the road back to the house. Easier than walking back through the woods.” Lana stepped across the wide ditch and turned with extended arms to help her mother cross. “You need to have something to drink. I don’t want you to drop off somewhere in the woods looking for Terry. Two missing people will not make Christmas any happier,” Helen said.

“Are we going to keep looking for her after dark?”

“What else would we do?”

*Call the police. Get the FBI involved. Missing children are kind of a big deal.* Lana shrugged. She knew no one would ever agree to that here; the county was too small, too isolated, too set in its ways for anyone to agree to call in outsiders. *Don’t overreact. Tim or John probably found her tangled up in some vines or something. You got stuck all the time as a kid.* “Do you remember that time when Daddy had to cut me out of the ivy?”

“I do.” They moved with haste up the road, dust leaving behind their footprints and kicking up on the hems of their skirts. “Frieda came in crying because you were all tangled up like in one of those movies with vicious people-eating plants, and Tim and Roger were getting their own ankles caught trying to dig you out. It took your Daddy all day to fish you out. He missed work and almost got fired for it.”

“He took away my baseball for it, too.”

“That was just about the only time you ever got punished, wasn’t it?”

“Except for the time I got kicked out for fifteen years.”

“You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?”
Lana inclined her eyebrows, and in spite of herself, a slight smirk teased the corners of her lips. “Maybe in fifteen years.”

The shadows stretched longer around them, shifting with the breeze as the bare branches of the trees wriggled like long arms, reaching for them, threatening to swallow them up into the abyss. Crickets hummed a peaceful whistling tune. As the stars began to peek out from above, Helen lifted her eyes to the sky. “Do you still think about that time he gave you the moon?” It was a pale sliver in the sky, waxing in recovery from the new moon.

“No, not really.” Lana followed her gaze to the silver rim of the moon. “I think I will, now, every time I look at the night sky.” I worked so hard to forget him and save myself the pain.

“Do you still play baseball?”

“Yeah, there’s a league of lesbians in their thirties who gather every Sunday night and act like pre-teen boys. Sister Mary Eunice is the referee.” Helen shot her a withering look, and Lana inclined her eyebrows. “No. I don’t. We played in college, but after the others got married, there were only the four of us left.” And you’d be hard-pressed to get Lois to touch a baseball.

“Are there people like you there? Homosexuals?”

“There are people like me everywhere, Mama. You just don’t see them.” Her eyebrows quirked at Lana’s words, so she continued, “Some people even think President Buchanan was gay.” Don’t push it, Lana. She cleared her throat. “But I do have friends like me in Boston. Not many, but some. One of my old professors, and a few of my classmates, and some people I met in bars. We keep to our own. It’s safer that way.”

“Hm.” The outline of the house appeared in the distance. The grunt indicated her mother’s displeasure, but Lana ignored it, focusing on the light in the window. On the porch, Frieda rocked on a rocking chair, the baby in her lap. The gray shadows obscured her face from view, but Lana didn’t need to see it to know its horrified, terrified contents to see them returning empty-handed. “Making love to a man is a lot better when you want to do it.”

Lana blinked, taken aback by the sudden interjection into her thoughts. “What?”

“It feels better when you want to do it. It doesn’t hurt.”

“I—I could’ve figured that out for myself?”

“I’m just saying, you can’t say you don’t like it until you’ve really given it a shot. It’s not as bad as everyone says it is. Even the first time, if you’ve found a gentle man, it shouldn’t hurt.”

Gritting her teeth, a hot blush sizzled to the surface of Lana’s skin. She pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth until she knew she could answer without giggling. “I’m pretty sure I know what I want by now, Mama. It might be better if you want to do it, but I don’t want to. Ever.” Once was more than I ever wanted. Maybe once wasn’t the norm, but I’m not about to try it again. Helen shot her a disgruntled look, so Lana added, “You can’t say you don’t like women until you’ve really given it a shot.”

“Oh, shut up.” Her mother swatted her on her shoulder like smacking a mosquito. “Fine. I’ll leave you alone. You’re still too smart for your own good.”

Frieda stood from the porch and jogged down the steps toward them. “Did you find her? Did you find anything?” Her breath hitched, and she paused, gulping audibly. “Did you see anything? No one else is back yet—Maybe one of them found her—oh, god.” She bounced Rex on her hip. He had her hair clutched in his fist, tugging on it, but she didn’t flinch from it. Her other hand pressed
to her face. “I can’t believe this. For fuck’s sake, tomorrow is Christmas! We need to head home—all of their presents are under the tree—What are we going to do if we can’t find her?”

Biting her lower lip, Lana hesitated, but then she took Frieda’s hand in her own. “Relax, Frieda, it’s okay. We’ll find her. We got lost in the woods all the time as kids. She’s probably caught in a thorn bush or something. She’ll be making a lot of noise. They’re probably plucking her out of the hedges right now.”

Helen put a hand on the inside of her elbow. “Let’s go inside. You need to drink something.” She looked up at Frieda. “We didn’t find anything but a bunch of dead animals and a bobcat. We went all the way to the road and down in the ravine. Someone else will find her. Have you eaten yet?”

“I can’t eat! My daughter is out there, somewhere, scared—or hurt—and I’m here, stuck here…” She drifted off when Lana tugged her by the wrist, gentle but insistent, back into the house. My mouth tastes like piss. I need to brush my teeth. The sour flavor of her own vomit hadn’t left her tongue. Frieda relented, sliding after her. She muffled her complaints in front of the rest of her children; Bruce followed them with his eyes like a telescope fixated on the moon, seeking some comfort from the sight of his mother, but she didn’t have anything to offer him. He had his arm around the small of Cindy’s back, keeping her nestled close. She stared at the floor and flapped her hands, admiring how her own fingers tangled together and slipped apart. “Are you sure you didn’t see anything?” she asked in a soft, broken voice.

“Sweetheart, if I got heartsick every time one of y’all ran off as kids, your father would’ve had me committed. Have a little faith.” Lana got herself a glass of water from the sink and sat at the kitchen table, sipping at it, while her mother rounded the table behind her, making a plate of food. Nausea and hunger mingled together for Lana, but she didn’t rise to eat. She feared her stomach would turn against her again. “She wouldn’t have wandered far from where Bruce and Cindy were. C’mon, eat something. You’re eating for three.”

“God, Mama, I’ve been eating for somebody other than myself for the past seven years. I think I can afford to miss a meal.” Frieda flopped into the wooden chair beside Lana, arms crossed, fists punched down into her elbows, bottom lip jutting out. A certain revulsion lay in her brown eyes, a loathing with which she regarded her engorged belly, which broke Lana’s heart. She’s barely holding it together. I wish I could do something for her. Lana’s attempt to help Frieda had resulted in a lost child. “I’m never having another baby,” Frieda muttered under her breath. “I’ll cut off John’s prick if I have to.”

“Language.” Helen placed a full plate in front of her with a fork, greens almost spilling over the edges. “You know the rules in this house. You eat what’s put in front of you.” Frieda’s dark eyes lifted back up to her mother, begrudging her, but she caved under the challenging expression she received and picked up the fork. “You’re just stressed out right now. Your hormones are out of whack, and none of this stress is helping. Once you’ve had a long rest, you won’t feel so bad.”

“No, Mama—I’m not stressed out. I’m tired of this! I’m tired of being pregnant! I don’t want any more kids. I’m happy with what I got. Terry is starting the second grade, and she’s going to be in sports, and I don’t want to be stuck being pregnant when she’s winning shit. I don’t want to be the mom who’s always big as a whale! And having twins is exhausting!” Helen opened her mouth, but Frieda cut her off. “No—I don’t want any more of your advice. You only did this three times. This is my sixth. I’m done doing this. If John won’t let me get fixed, he can wear a condom.”

Lana cringed at the mental image of John using her sister as a receptacle for his penis. Gross. “I should be out there looking for my daughter right now, and I’m stuck in here all because John wouldn’t let me get fixed the last two times I wanted it.”

Helen’s eyes widened. “Twice?”
“Yes! Twice!”

“Children are a blessing, Frieda.”

“You had four of them. Three and a half, since you ran Lana off for fifteen years.” Helen scowled, but Frieda didn’t flinch at her sour look, wrapping up the greens around the fork. She slipped it between her teeth and chewed with slow grates of her teeth. Swallowing a hard lump, she glared back across the table at her. “She ran off for half her life, so she counts as half.”

“You have no right to speak to me that way.”

“I’m not a little girl anymore! I’ll speak however I like! And I’m not happy with this! With how you look at her and Sister Mary Eunice! Or how you didn’t want to leave them both alone with my kids!” Lana whipped her head up from the grain of the table, narrowing her eyes at her mother. She didn’t say anything about that. She clenched her jaw. “I’m not here to start a fight. We’re leaving on the twenty-sixth. Sooner if it’s going to be a problem.” She cleared her throat and pushed back from the table, pouring the remnants of her glass of water down the drain. “I better go outside. I’d hate to accidentally give my disease to one of the kids.” Frieda’s lips parted, trying to interrupt, but Lana arched an eyebrow. “Terry told me about that. She had to make sure she couldn’t catch it.”

Too late, she wanted to say, she already has, but she bit down on the tip of her tongue. Speculating about the sexuality of a six year old would make her no friends.

“Lana, wait—”

The screen door slammed shut behind her. Frieda scrambled after her. But Lana halted on the porch, where John and Roger came out of the woods, the former picking his scalp in search of ticks. They were empty-handed. The evening light cast their shadows long behind them, the landscape quickly earning a cloak of blue and gray. “Did you have any luck?” Roger called to her, jogging ahead, but Lana shook her head. “Are Tim and Sister Mary Eunice back yet? Maybe they found her. It’s getting really dark out there. You can barely see your own hand in front of your face.” He reached into the pocket of his jacket. “Cigarette?” She declined, eyes averted. “Is everything alright?”

Rocking back on her heels, she lifted her chin. “Mama and Frieda are fighting. Over me. I decided to remove myself and make less of a spectacle.” John’s eyes widened, but as he reached for the door handle, she placed her hand over it first. “I wouldn’t. Frieda’s not happy with you right now. She’s talking about cutting off your dick if you try to knock her up again. And in the interest of full disclosure, I’m obligated to tell you that if my sister asks me to help her castrate you, I will do it.” He took a step back, placing a wide gap of space between her body and his, and he squeezed his legs tight together like she intended to rip his penis off on the spot. She brushed past him and sat down on the stoop, hunched over against the cold. I miss Mary Eunice. These people made her feel so unloved. Her mother loved her to her face and loathed her behind her back. John and Roger shuffled away from her with their legs pinched together, exchanging glances whenever she passed; they said nothing out of turn, but the lack of words caused a void of all the inside jokes they had shared as children. Frieda wanted to embrace her, but something still rested in her eyes, some alienation which she would never truly shake. Mary Eunice loved Lana,
first as a friend and then as something more. That soft feeling of being loved always grew inside of her when she met her girlfriend’s eyes. Her family made her their enemy, whether they wanted to or not. In Mary Eunice, she found nothing but pure, unadulterated love.

Frieda shoved her way out the front door. “I’m not talking about this anymore, Mama!” She crossed her arms under her breasts, resting them on the curve of her stomach. “Did you find her? Did you find anything?”

“We’re still waiting for Tim and Sister Mary Eunice to come back out,” Roger placated. “They went in the same direction as the kids. They might be taking so long because they found her and they’re trying to dig her out of the ivy in the dark. We should’ve taken flashlights before we took off.”

Heaving a frustrated sigh, Frieda sank onto the stoop beside Lana. “I’m sorry—I swear I didn’t tell Terry anything. She must have overheard us fighting—”

“She did. She said so.”

“What did you tell her?”

Lana leaned back, lifting her eyes to the star-freckled sky. There aren’t stars like this in Boston. The large city lights always swallowed the starlight so she could see only the moon. But out here, in the country, she could gaze up at the universe, the same sky which her father had once said she could own if she put her name on the right star. “I said you would explain it when she was older, and she shouldn’t worry about it until then.”

The corners of Frieda’s lips curled upward. “Darn. I was hoping you would take that bullet for me. I wouldn’t even know where to begin, or what to say.” She rested her head on Lana’s shoulder. The warmth of soft hair pooling over her shoulder made Lana turn her head so the locks brushed her cheek. “How would you do it? What would make it sound best?”

Shrugging, Lana caught a whiff of Frieda’s perfume tied into the locks of her hair. “I would say that I love women the same way most women love men. If it matters. If you have to bring it up at all.” It’s not like they get to have Aunt Wendy. Lana’s eyes stung. Wendy would’ve loved Frieda’s kids, far more than Lana could ever imagine. She would’ve taken her role in the family and served as Frieda’s personal maid just to compensate for the love she received from those children.

“Frieda? Promise me something?” Frieda nodded. “Promise me if any of your kids ever comes out —no matter what, you won’t do to them what was done to me. I don’t want any of them to know what that feels like.”

Behind them, their mother gave a haughty sniff, but she didn’t interrupt, nor did John or Roger, to their credit. “I promise, Lana.” Frieda put an arm around her shoulders and smoothed up and down her bicep. “I know I’ve got a full nest, but I’m not letting any of my eggs fall out. I’m a good hen.” Lana chuckled, and Frieda kissed her cheek, her embrace warm and soft. The foreign firmness to her abdomen poked Lana’s squishy stomach. Pressed up against her body, a few jars through Frieda’s dress impacted her belly. Lana hitched a breath. Thank god I don’t ever have to go through that.

The hedges rattled as Timothy dashed from them. The broken thorns of briar bushes and burrs clung to his sodden clothing. His wet hair flipped back and forth on his head, and rivulets of water trickled down his face. He stumbled over his own feet and scrambled to right himself before he dove straight into the dirt of the driveway. Slamming to a halt, he scanned the porch with wide eyes. “Is she here?”

Frieda quirked her brow, and she stood; Lana stood beside her. “No—we were hoping you had
“Not Terry!” Timothy swayed on his feet. “Sister Mary Eunice!”

“What?” Lana’s throat dried. “You lost her?”

“No! Yes! Kind of!” Shaking his head, Timothy pressed both hands to his temples, pacing back and forth. “I jumped down in the creekbed to see if Terry had fallen down in it, and I told her, I told her to stay right there, there on the low point, so she could help me up if I couldn’t make it by myself—” He gulped. Strings of saliva fell from his mouth. He shivered from head to toe; in the faint moonlight, his lips were stained blue. “When I finally got back up, she was gone. I looked everywhere, s-swear to god, I did! I—I thought, maybe, she’d found Terry and headed back here without me—I was hoping—” He swayed on his feet.

Roger pushed between Lana and Frieda to approach his twin. “Come here. You’ve got to take off these wet clothes. You were supposed to look for the girl, not go swimming for her.”

“N-No, I’ve got to find Sister Mary Eunice. I lost her out there, she’s got to be lost, she probably got turned around…” Roger dragged him by the arm back up onto the porch and began to unbutton his shirt. He dropped each drenched garment to the wooden porch. “I shouldn’t have left her by herself—Lana, I’m sorry, I thought she was right there, I never would’ve left her if I thought she would wander off—”

“Mary Eunice wouldn’t wander off.” Timothy fell silent; in spite of the softness of Lana’s whisper, everyone heard it. Her throat closed up. Her voice formed a croak, and one hand fluttered up to the base of her throat. Heart floundering, each breath became a battle. This can’t happen. But the happy place in her mind had Mary Eunice in it, and any thought of her now stung like a cane across her buttocks.

Frieda clung to Lana’s arm, wrapping around it. She made a thin mewl in the back of her throat and squeezed tight. Roger studied Lana. “Are you sure? She might’ve seen something she thought was Terry and gotten turned around. The forest is thick through those parts. It would be easy for her to get lost.”

Oh, god. Lana’s heart ached. What had she done? I never should’ve let them separate us. “No, she—she’s a nun. They have crazy discipline—if she said she would stay there, she would stay there, or she would say something before she walked away. She wouldn’t just—She couldn’t just disappear!” She choked on her next breath, but her eyes were dry. Her heart wept for the absence of tears. Each slurp of breath sent a pang of agony through her chest.

Their mother slid between them. “Now, now, she didn’t just disappear. It’s a lot of land to cover. Maybe she’s with Terry.”

She placed a hand on Lana’s forearm, but Lana snatched away. “Don’t touch me!” She retracted like her mother’s touch had burned her. “Frieda’s right. You’re two-faced! And I don’t want you to love me now if you’re going to turn around and say how perverted I am tomorrow!” Her lower jaw and hands trembled, and Frieda wrapped them up tight in her own to try to steady them, but she couldn’t quite manage it. “You can love me or hate me, but I won’t let you do both. I’ve tolerated too much of that bullshit to start stomaching it now.”

Her mother’s eyes glittered with hurt, but before she could retort, John interrupted. “Hey! This isn’t the fight we need to be having right now! Two people are missing, and it’s after dark! We need to call the police!”
“We are the police,” Timothy said. His undershirt clung to his well-muscled chest. “It’s Christmas Eve. No other officers are going to come out here to look for a kid and a grown ass woman who got turned around in the woods.”

John stepped under the porch light. “What if they didn’t just get lost in the woods?”

Lana froze. “What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s a pretty goddamn big coincidence that yesterday, Fred Peyser shows up here with a shotgun and threatens the whole family, and today, a little girl and a grown woman head the same direction—toward Peyser property—and both go missing without a hide or hair left behind.” Frieda whimpered again. She dug her fingers into Lana’s arm so tightly, she feared bruises would be left behind, but the pinching pain didn’t occur to Lana, whose erratic breathing threatened to make her collapse.

Helen waved him off. “Don’t be silly. People like that don’t exist down here. You’re a Yankee. You don’t understand. Insanity is in the water up in those parts. Nobody down here would hurt a hair on your little girl’s head. And Mary Eunice is smart enough to keep her mouth shut if anybody in a white robe asks her about her faith.”

Stomach flipping, Lana gulped to keep from retching again. The Klan. There are probably Klansmen all over the county. Oh, god, Mary Eunice doesn’t know the first thing about the Klan. She covered her mouth with her hand. “I think we need to call in the police,” John repeated. “Real police.”

“We are real police!”

“For fuck’s sake, your sister has caught more criminals than you have!”

The light reflected on John’s eyes, casting a glassy glare at Lana’s face, and for a moment his body morphed into something else, someone else, towering over her, glaring down at her, and the voice she heard belonged to a dead man. “You’ll never have anything, Lana,” Dr. Thredson said. “It’s a symptom of your disease.”

She swooned. Frieda caught her under the arms. “Lana! Lana, what’s wrong?” Each breath whistled in and out of her lungs and caught in her nose. *Fuck, fuck, I need a pill, oh, god.* She reached down for the baling twine connected to Gus’s collar, where he had lain under the porch, and tugged it, hoping he could grant her some reprieve. But it was far too light. She drew up the string of twine—nothing attached to it.


Frieda burst into a broken sob. Lana’s arms, numb and quaking, reached to hug her, holding fast to her like a stranded fisherman grasped a raft. *What are we going to do?*

…

Mary Eunice kept one eye up to the sky, already streaked pink with sunset, as she followed Timothy down into the forest toward the creek. She kept one hand braced on tree trunks, switching from tree to tree as she proceeded, afraid of losing her balance and falling into the creek again. *It won’t help anyone if I get stuck down there again.* “Hey,” Tim said, “I really am sorry about—about yesterday. I didn’t mean to almost kill you. It was an accident.” He gave her a sheepish look. He had Lana’s soft eyes—the whole family did, even Helen, though hers were often hard and hot as coals smoldering in a grill, less like molten chocolate and more like a branding iron.
“It’s fine,” she said. “No harm done.” They had ruined their clothes, but in exchange, they had become girlfriends. We’ve been girlfriends for less than a day. Just a day. Just today. I can’t wait until I have her in my arms again. She couldn’t thank Timothy for his transgression; she knew better than to betray their secret, even to Lana’s brother, who seemed neutral enough on the matter. They had to stay under wraps while they were here, and hopefully once they had gone home, they could enjoy one another in privacy once again.

What does this change? Mary Eunice sucked her lower lip, plucking it between her teeth and nibbling as she considered. They already kissed—but now she didn’t have to feel so guilty about it, she supposed. Maybe it didn’t change much at all. She couldn’t make love. Regret prickled in her chest. Is that fair to her? Lana had had a real relationship, a real love, with real lovemaking, and Mary Eunice had taken vows to the church, saving herself for God. She had a foot in each world. Lana deserved all of her, not just part of her, not just the half untouched by God; likewise, she had promised all of herself to God, not fragments of her heart. I want to be hers. But God is all I’ve ever known.

Lifting her eyes to the sky, Mary Eunice peered at the emerging stars, twinkling little lights peaking out from the darkening backdrop. The sliver of a moon had a mystical aura around it. Lord, guide me. I believe You put my feet on the path to be with Lana. I believe I wouldn’t have these feelings for her, she wouldn’t have the same feelings for me, if we weren’t meant to be together. But we’re not allowed to join in holy matrimony, and I’m uncertain of my role in the church—if I’m meant to forfeit my position… I was chosen to serve You. I am patient. Show me the light. Show me the trail meant for me, and I shall follow it without question. Amen.

She caught onto a low hanging branch as they neared the edge of the precipice, dropping into the creek a few feet below. “Well, I’m glad you’re forgiving. If I were much smaller, Mama would’ve whooped me, and that would’ve been quite the sight for everyone to see.” Timothy cleared his throat and planted his hands on his hips. “Hang back, alright? I’m going to climb down there and see if she fell in the water or is hiding out on the shore. I should be able to get back up on my own—it’s shallower here, a bunch of roots, I think I can climb them—but if I can’t, I might need you to give me a hand.”

Mary Eunice nodded. “Right—of course. I’ll stay right here. Let me know if you see anything.”

“Gotcha.” Timothy sat down on the edge of the cliff and pushed himself off. He landed with a loud grunt; his shoes squelched deep in the mud, sucking up with a loud noise with every step. “Alright, Sister? I’ll be down here awhile. Hang tight. I’ll go under the water for her if I’ve gotta.”

“Ohkay.” The sound of his footsteps softened as he walked away, farther down the shoreline of the creek belong, and Mary Eunice relinquished the willowy branch from her grasp, trusting herself to near the edge of the steep drop-off. Below, the water spiraled in twisted rhythms, too muddy for her to see her reflection. Is this where they brought us up yesterday? Her memories of the night before were dim. She remembered how she had realized Lana had fallen asleep, remembered wrapping herself around her sleeping partner to keep her warm, and remembered recognizing terror in Lana’s voice when she was so cold and so sleepy. Someone had picked her up, at some point—not Lana, but a man. He had a soft voice and strong, warm arms, but his burly touch made her crave the sweet sustenance of her girlfriend. Then, she had crawled into Lana’s lap and tucked herself beneath Lana’s arm and allowed heat to return to her blood once more. Frieda saw. What does she think? Does she know we’re a couple? Mary Eunice’s cheeks warmed at the prospect of belonging to a couple. This whole business was so foreign to her. I’m like a silly teenager.

From the trees behind her, a few birds upstarted with a screech. Mary Eunice whirled around. The shapes lifted into the darkening sky and vanished. The branches from the trees shifted. Is that the wind? “Hello?” she called out. A blur of brown darted between the tree trunks. She blinked and
squinted, fighting to make out a shape, any sort of shape, but the movement was so fast, she could hardly make it out. What color was she wearing? She couldn’t remember. “Terry? Terry, is that you, sweetheart?” Only silence punctuated by the crickets whistling and the babbling of the creek answered her.

Mary Eunice stole a look over her shoulder. “Timothy?” He had wandered far down the shore, both out of sight and out of earshot. He said to stay right here. I should wait. Her mouth dried. She couldn’t just leave Teresa. She could be hurt or scared. If it’s her, I need to go to her.

Swallowing hard, Mary Eunice called again, “Timothy? I saw something—I’m afraid it’s her. I’ll be right back.” She scanned the vicinity once, the tall oak tree leaning over the creek with the protruding roots from the wall below, easing the way to scale back up to the forest floor. I’ll be able to find my way back. This is pretty notable. I’ll keep walking in the same direction and turn around when I’m ready to come back. Their land can’t be that big.

Following the creek, Mary Eunice sought the brown blur again. “Teresa!” She squinted into the lengthening shadows and blue-gray tint casting everything into a smeared abstract lens. “Teresa? Is that you?” Up ahead, dry leaves rustled and crackled in their distinct musical rhythm, and Mary Eunice lifted her head,straightening her back. “Terry!” Breaking away from the creek, Mary Eunice squeezed between two tree trunks, catching a cobweb across her chest. “Terry!” The shape kept darting between the trees, kicking up leaves as it hared away from her. A distinct scent of musk marked its path. There’s no way she can run that fast! Still, Mary Eunice didn’t give up her chase; some fear drove her, an irrational notion of some demon carrying away the child so she could only chase and pray. Bushes and brambles whipped by her, catching on her clothes and skin with thorns, leaving burrs clotted in her hair. Mary Eunice scraped by another tree trunk and dragged forth into a small, marshy clearing with no trees. The silhouette of the doe she had pursued through the forest vanished into the opposing hedges.

How far did I run? Mary Eunice glanced back over her shoulder, but nothing stood out to her. She didn’t see the path she had taken; the babbling of the creek had gone silent. I can’t have gone that far. Her chest ached from the exertion, nose running from sucking greedily at the cold air, but it didn’t feel like more than a few minutes since she had left Timothy. Maybe I should stay here. If I get more turned around, it’ll make it harder for them to find me. She gauged the darkening forest which she had traversed. But I’m looking for Teresa. They’re looking for her. They’re not looking for me. I should try to find my way back.

Turning on the spot, Mary Eunice lifted her foot from the mud, staring down at the earth to try and keep from catching her skirt on anything else. “Oh, my word…” In the muck beside her footprint rested another distinct shape—that of a child’s shoe. She came this way. The tiny footprints were stretched across the marshy clearing. “Terry?” she called out again. She didn’t fall in the creek at all. She came this way. The wind picked up, whistling through the bare branches of the trees, bending the ferns. Clouds thickened overhead. It’s nearly dark. Mary Eunice took her eye up to the sky, evening bleeding into night. She couldn’t leave Terry out here in the dark, not knowing she had come so close to finding the little girl. “Terry?”

With one hesitant step in front of another, Mary Eunice traversed the muddy stretch of land. In the faint light, the footprints blended in with the dark earth. Even the moon shed no silvery aid upon her. “Terry?” Each step squished deep into the muck and splashed dirty water over her socks and ankles. As she entered the copse of trees across the clearing, the branches muted the sky, leaving her no starlight. Is this what it’s like to be blind? Arms outstretched, she fumbled around in the dark, bouncing from tree trunk to tree trunk. “Terry?”

In the dark, someone hitched a breath. Mary Eunice froze, bracing herself against the nearest tree. Then, in a faint voice: “Help, please…” The girl sniffled and whimpered, the cry distant but oh so near. Mary Eunice pointed herself in the right direction. “Help me, I’m stuck.”
“You’re stuck? What’s wrong? Where are you?”

Terry sniffled. A muffled sob breached the space between them. “I’m in a sticker bush,” she whimpered. Mary Eunice tiptoed across the space, squinting between the gray lumps of tree trunks and fighting to discern anything from the black of the forest floor below. “I was looking for Cindy… I fell… It hurts…”

With her hands, Mary Eunice mapped the area in front of her. “It’s okay, sweetheart, I’m here now. I’ll get you out of here and take you home.” How? I can’t see anything! I’ll never be able to find the way back to Lana’s house! Her mouth trembled with the dark thoughts. God, guide me. You brought me to her. Help me bring her home to Frieda. Her hand thrust into the thorn bush. She hissed in response, but then her fingers grazed Terry’s sweater. “I’m right here. Can you move?”

“I can’t—I’m all t-tangled up,” Terry sniffled around her words. “I want my Mama… It’s so cold.”

“It’s okay. I’ll get you out of here, and I’ll take you back to your Mama.” Mary Eunice grabbed one thorny branch where it had snagged Terry’s clothes and snapped it off. The thorns pierced her skin like a cat’s claw. She bit her lip to keep from crying out. The deeper she leaned into the bush, the closer the branches came to grazing her face. Her palms roamed Terry’s body, plucking away the thicket wherever it clung to her. “You’ve got a bunch of them stuck in your hands. I’m going to try and get them out, alright? I need you to be very brave for me.”

In a muted voice, Terry agreed, “Okay.” The bush clawed at Mary Eunice’s cheeks. She lifted one of Terry’s hands and plucked the thorns from it one by one. Terry whimpered and sniffled. “Did—Did Brucie find Cindy? Is she okay?”

Mary Eunice blinked at the quiet question. Her heart broke for the little girl, who, even now, dedicated more of herself to her sister than to her own pain. “Yes, she’s fine. We just lost you.” The cold breeze ruffled her habit and left her fingers numb. When she freed the first of Terry’s scratched hands, an arm looped around her neck. “It’s alright. Let me get this mess out of your hair, and we’ll try to find our way back home.” Her blood mixed with the child’s in all of the shallow scratches the thorns left on their arms and faces. Each fingertip pricked like a diabetic, Mary Eunice rustled through Terry’s fine hair, dragging out the branches and breaking them from her scalp. “Okay—Okay, I think I got them all. Hold onto me. I’m going to try to pull you out.” Terry nodded into the crook of her neck. Mary Eunice hoisted her under the arms and dragged her from the hedge, landing on her rear in the mud a few feet away.

Terry’s whole body shivered. Her next sob, she muffled in Mary Eunice’s neck. “You talk funny,” she said after a moment of silence. “You do. You talk like a real English-like person.” Mary Eunice chuckled, smoothing a hand down Terry’s back to try and warm her. “Miss Sister?” Thick eyelashes brushed against her skin, still wet with tears. She hummed acknowledgment. “Do you… Do you hear something?”

“Here.” Mary Eunice’s chilled fingers fumbled with the buttons of her habit. She slipped her arms out of it and draped it around Terry. “Put your arms in the sleeves. It’ll help you stay warm.” She wrapped it around the girl and clasped a few of the buttons in the dark. I wish I had my veil. She had left her coif and veil in Lana’s car by mistake after the funeral. “Your Mama and Daddy had just fixed dinner when we left to find you. I bet there’s plenty left for you to have some when you get back.”

Terry snuggled tight into her chest, face buried there. “You talk funny,” she said after a moment of silence. “You do. You talk like a real English-like person.” Mary Eunice chuckled, smoothing a hand down Terry’s back to try and warm her. “Miss Sister?” Thick eyelashes brushed against her skin, still wet with tears. She hummed acknowledgment. “Do you… Do you hear something?”
Chest tightening, Mary Eunice sucked in a deep breath of cold air. Terry tensed in her lap. She coiled her arms tighter around the little girl. Distant, but drawing closer with each passing second, something hared through the darkness, kicking up leaves. Its breath hassled. What kind of predators live out here? Mary Eunice had never thought to ask Lana that question. “Yes, I do,” she whispered. Terry inhaled, but Mary Eunice clapped a hand over her mouth to keep her from shrieking. “Sh, sh, be very quiet and very still. I won’t let anything hurt you.” A thin mewl rose from Terry. She pressed her face into Mary Eunice’s shoulder. God, protect us.

The paces of the racing animal slowed as it neared them. It can smell us. Mary Eunice clutched Terry so tight, she feared she would hurt her. Don’t let it hurt us, please. Her wide eyes blindly scanned the thicket, making out nothing in the blur of blacks, grays, and blues. Movement shuffled in front of her. Oh, no, please. Shifting her body, Mary Eunice kept herself drawn up over Terry. Don’t let it hurt her, please. The girl mewed another pathetic sound. The animal froze, too late for Mary Eunice to do anything to hold in her cry.

Cringing, Mary Eunice tucked in her head, but the animal didn’t lunge. Instead, a cold nose pressed to her cheek. A warm, fat tongue sponged out of his mouth to wipe away the line of blood trickling down her face. “Oh—” Mary Eunice choked out the syllable, nearly screaming at Gus. She released Terry. Her scratched hands reached out and covered Gus’s large head, fondling his soft ears. She found his collar, but less than a foot of baling twine was still attached; the end was frayed, like he had chewed it off to free himself. “Oh, Gus, you scared me to death.” His wagging tail stirred the air. “Oh, thank God—Terry, don’t worry, it’s just the dog.”

“I thought we were about to get eaten,” Terry whispered. Me, too. “No—No, don’t be silly.” Mary Eunice cleared her throat. “Here.” She placed a hand on a tree trunk and guided herself to her feet, and then she fumbled around for Terry. “Let me carry you. Alright?” Terry wrapped herself around Mary Eunice’s legs. God, give me strength. She didn’t know how far she had come in this direction, but she feared in the dark, laden with an extra forty pounds of child, it would take her much longer heading back. She hoisted the girl up under her arms. “Oof. You’re a big girl. Hold on tight.” She planted a quick kiss to the brow of Terry’s head. “Go on, Gus. Go on.”

He didn’t budge from beneath her. Mary Eunice cleared her throat and took the first step around a tree. Gus bumped into her legs, guiding her in the other direction. “Okay. I understand.” Mary Eunice turned and marched that way, each footstep squelching and spattering mud all over her feet and legs.

The darkness made everything look the same, and several times, Mary Eunice staggered straight into a tree or another thorny bush; she had only the benefit of holding Terry above the snags of the forest. The girl drifted off to sleep. Mary Eunice’s arms ached, and she desperately wanted to shift Terry onto her back, but she didn’t have the heart to wake the child. Chest straining, she stumbled onward over roots and thickets of ivy winding around her ankles, twisting her gait into a bumbling, skewed thing. But Gus thumped against her thighs whenever she pointed the wrong direction, tripping her just as much as the protruding roots and uneven earth. By the time she could see the sky again through the hanging branches, the moon had changed position. It’s been hours. In spite of the chill, an overexerted sweat bled from Mary Eunice’s body, streaming into her burning eyes and aching in all of her shallow cuts.

Stumbling, she broke out from the trees onto the dirt road. The road. The road. Mary Eunice blinked a few times. There were no street lamps, but the moon and stars gave a shred more illumination than they had in the forest. To the left, she spied nothing but darkness. But Gus jetted out down the road, barking cries of jubilation, and ahead of him, the silhouette of the house, the
porchlight glowing down on six figures. *Home.* Relief nearly blinded Mary Eunice. A long sigh fluttered from her, easing the tension in her shoulders. Hoisting Terry up higher on her hip, she followed Gus down the dirt road in the quickest lumbering gait she could manage.

The dust from the dirt road kicked up by her shoes floated around her in a generous layer through the air; it tasted smoky on her tongue, but she couldn’t close her mouth to breathe through her nose from the sheer exertion shedding from her every pore. The people—she distinguished them by their shapes as she drew nearer: John pacing with his gangly legs; Roger and Timothy identical in their posture; Helen’s dumpy shape facing her family with arms crossed in a bold refusal to lose her matriarchal status; Frieda and Lana resting on the porch stoop with their hands tangled up in one another, heads resting against one another’s, shoulders quaking with distress—perked up at the sight of Gus sprinting down the dirt road up on the old farmhouse. *Lana.* Mary Eunice’s heart skipped a beat as Lana and Frieda both rose from the steps.

Frieda lost her shock first and jumped off of the steps. Her heavy middle didn’t stop her from racing across the open yard. “Oh my god! Terry!” Her bare feet slapped the earth. Full form slamming into Mary Eunice, she wrapped both arms around her. Mary Eunice stumbled backward. Her whole body quivered. I need to sit down.

“Oh my god, thank you—thank you.” Behind her, John and Helen and Lana all followed, Timothy and Roger hanging back.

Terry stirred, lifting her cheek from Mary Eunice’s shoulder. “Mama?” She opened her arms, and Frieda took her away. “Mama! Mama, I was so scared!” Frieda kissed the top of her head. “I fell in a sticker bush—I got all stuck—Miss Sister found me and got me out—it hurt, Mama, it was so cold—Mama, I’m hungry.”

At her last words, Frieda gave a tearful laugh. “It’s alright, baby, we’ll fix you something to eat.” She turned and nearly rammed head-first into John. “She’s okay. She’s okay. Come here, baby, let’s take you inside and get you something to eat.” She smoothed a hand over Terry’s tangled hair, smattered with thorns from her excursion in the briar bush.

Lana reached her side, but she stopped halfway through reaching for Mary Eunice’s hand in front of the watchful eyes of her family. Mary Eunice gulped and scanned her with her eyes once. *She’s shaking.* Lana had paled, and her hands and jaw trembled in synchronization. *She needs her medication. She needs to sit down.* The urge to grab her and wrap her in a tight hug and kiss the tears from her cheeks filled Mary Eunice’s chest and threatened to smother her. But Helen stood before her with a stern, set jaw. I can’t lay a hand on her. “How did you find her? How did you find your way back out?”

The words swelled up in her throat. “I—I got lost, really, it was just a coincidence—I saw her footprints, and I followed them—and Gus found us and led us back out. I never would’ve found the way out without him. It was too dark. I kept running into trees.”

“I can see that.” Helen touched her scraped cheek, tracing the torn skin with the pad of her thumb. “Come inside and eat dinner. Frieda and John are taking the children home tonight so they can open their Christmas presents in the morning, so you can have your own room.”

She offered it like a gift. *It's not a gift. It's a command.* “Yes, Mrs. Winters,” Mary Eunice whispered, averting her eyes. Lana’s anxiety buzzed in the air beside her. *I don’t want my own room. I want to hold her.* She swallowed the dry lump in her throat. Helen huffed, shooting a dark look at Lana, before she whirled around and stormed back toward the house. Mary Eunice opened her hand and squeezed Lana’s. The sweat from her palm rubbed against her. “I’m sorry.”

Lana cupped Mary Eunice’s hand in her own. The front door slammed shut, everyone safely
tucked inside. “She fought with me and Frieda. She’s not very happy—about anything.” Lana’s body shivered against hers, trying to bring heat to it. “She just wants to punish me.” Gus paced around their feet, tongue flapping, pleading for attention, but Lana found none to give him. “I was so scared.”

“Did you take your medicine?” Lana bobbed her head. “We can leave soon, can’t we?” I want to hug her. I want to kiss her. Lana nodded again. “What did you fight about?” Mary Eunice asked, softer now, hesitant; she didn’t know if Lana wanted to tell her, didn’t know if she wanted to know even though she asked.

“Everything.” Mary Eunice blinked, surprised by her answer. “It’s fifteen years of pent-up arguments. She wants to love me, but she—she doesn’t want what that entails. And Frieda isn’t helping. Frieda just wants to antagonize her, or she thinks she’s fixing things, but she’s not. She’s just making it worse.” She squared up, facing Mary Eunice. “Don’t worry about them. We’ll get through it. Are you okay?” She licked her thumb and wiped away a trail of dried blood from beneath Mary Eunice’s eye.

“I’m fine. I’m just glad I found her.”

Lana squeezed her hand once more, and they headed inside, separated, an invisible wedge driven between the two of them keeping them apart. In the house, Frieda was packing their bags and dressing the children, while John coaxed Terry into eating a plate of food, still wrapped in Mary Eunice’s habit. Timothy and Roger hovered by the front door. “Hey, Mama,” Timothy said, “we’re gonna split now, but we’ll be back in the morning for Christmas breakfast. We want to take Lana around town and show her things while it’s dead so we won’t get lynched.” They laughed, but dark lines settled across Lana’s face; she didn’t find the joke funny. Mary Eunice averted her eyes to keep from thinking too deeply about the implications of their laughter.

“Christmas pageant is what time tomorrow night, Frieda?”

“Seven.” Frieda straightened, bouncing the baby on her hip. “Seven at night. You all have to come. My kids are half the cast. Terry is Mary, Bruce is one of the wise men, and Cindy is one of the sheep—”

Helen scoffed. “Oh, please. No one else auditioned. Little Linda only agreed to be Joseph because of Terry.” Lana glanced up at Mary Eunice, and her face warmed when she remembered what Lana had said earlier about Terry being a lesbian. It can’t be. Kids her age don’t have any sense of what they want for the rest of their lives. She just has a close friend. That’s good for a child.

“Mama, let me have a moment. Eight kids—one of them has gotta make it to Hollywood and get rich and buy me a mansion. It all starts with the church pageants.” Timothy and Roger both excused themselves and stepped out.

John cleared off Terry’s plate in the trash. “Go put your shoes on, sugar.” She hopped out of the kitchen chair and grabbed her sneakers. “I bet Rex is the one who gets rich,” he said. “We gave him a Hollywood star name. Marlon Brando. Humphrey Bogart. Rex Michaels.” The baby cooed, a broad smile beaming up at his mother, and though she gave an exasperated roll of her eyes, she couldn’t help but smile back at her son. John hooked his arm around his wife and planted a kiss on her temple. Frieda gave him a warm look, a slight blush tinging her skin. Does she really love him? Was she just angry earlier? Angry and sad and overwhelmed? Mary Eunice hoped so. I hope he lets her stop having kids. “C’mon, Terry, give Sister Mary Eunice her costume back.”

Lana inclined an eyebrow. “It’s called a habit.”

With a sheepish chuckle, John smoothed his hand over the back of his head. “I knew that. I think.”
Clumsy hands fumbling with the buttons, Terry stumbled over to Mary Eunice. In the light of the house, Mary Eunice could see her dirty face in full color, scratched all over, twigs tangled in her hair. Warmth gathered in the pit of Mary Eunice’s stomach, and she knelt down in front of the girl. “Let me help.” She unclasped the buttons one by one. Terry’s hands trembled in the air between them, unsteady, still cold from their excursion in the outdoors. Mary Eunice undid the last button and let the habit fall from Terry’s slight shoulders. The habit had collected burrs and thorns but otherwise looked unharmed—it hadn’t torn, anyway. “There we are. Are you okay? Not hungry anymore?”

Shaking her head, Terry hurled herself at Mary Eunice with open arms. She caught them tight around her neck and squeezed. “Thank you.” Mary Eunice smiled at the soft words and reciprocated the hug. She’s sweet. It’s a shame Lana can’t be closer to them all. They’re going to be good kids. “Miss Sister?” Terry whispered, low, right at the cusp of her ear. Mary Eunice glanced up at the other adults, but no one seemed to have noticed the murmured words. “Can I tell you a secret?” Mary Eunice hummed her agreement. “I think I’m in love with you.”

Mary Eunice choked on her own breath. She gulped to steady herself, fighting to keep from betraying her shock—the words, the innocent musings of a child who knew no better, would ignite the family into turmoil once again, perhaps more vicious than before. “Is that so?” she asked in a voice just as small.

Pulling back, both big eyes fixed on her face, and Terry nodded, slow and solemn. “Is that okay?”

With a soft hand, Mary Eunice tucked a stray lock of hair behind Terry’s ear. “Of course it is, sweetie. I promise. Now run on home. Santa’s coming tonight. You gotta get there and leave some sweets out for him.” Terry grinned, and she whirled around, dashing back to her father’s side.

John and Frieda excused their family with a chorus of, “Merry Christmas!” from the kids who could speak, the baby babbling along in some other chime all of his own. Without them, the house seemed to grow, the emptiness swallowing them, and the urge to draw closer to Lana rose inside of her, but Mary Eunice knew better than to obey it; Helen stared at them in the silence, waiting for them to make an incriminating move.

Once the rumbling of the motor had died down in the distance, the living room remained a statuesque moment, gargoyles looming over one another in the falling of night. Mary Eunice’s heart skipped a beat when Helen’s sharp gaze fell onto her. Is she going to kick us out? She held her breath until her chest pinched with discomfort. “Let the dog in.” They both ogled at her, too petrified to obey the command. “Are you deaf? Let the dog in. It’s going to get cold tonight. He earned his keep. Just keep him off the furniture.”

Tongue darting across her lips, Lana said, “Yes, Mama,” and turned, stiff as a robot, to the front door. She whistled, and Gus ran through the open door with his head and tail held high. He greeted her by bumping his head against her thigh, and she bowed down to scratch behind his ears, whispering, “Good boy, Gus, good boy.”

The hostility exuding from Helen’s frame didn’t dissipate. “You can go shower, Sister.” She’s getting Lana alone. Mary Eunice glanced back at Lana. I don’t want to leave her. Her night was hard enough. She doesn’t deserve to get harassed on top of it. “Well?” Lana nodded to her, an agreement, and reluctantly, she pulled herself away. “I asked Frieda to change the sheets in the other bedroom. It should be ready for you.”

A cold stone sank in the pit of Mary Eunice’s stomach. “Yes, ma’am. Thank you.” I don’t thank you. I would rather sleep with Lana in the car than let your walls separate us. She bit her tongue.
She couldn’t start a fight between Lana and her mother, not now. They were both grieving, and it was Christmas, and they were exhausted. So she turned and headed down the hall, head down, shoulders slumped.

After her shower, Mary Eunice folded herself into bed and flicked on the bedside lamp to read her bible. Gus lay on the floor, tail thumping whenever she turned a page. “Leah was tender eyed, but Rachel was beautiful and well-favored. And Jacob loved Rachel; and said, I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter. And Laban said, It is better that I give her to thee, than that I should give her to another man: abide with me.” Mary Eunice nibbled on her lower lip as she read, hand absenty picking at the scabs on her left arm. She had read this story before, but she always returned to it when she needed help measuring her patience. “And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.” Perhaps the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah was no pillar of fidelity, but the notion of slaving for fourteen years for the woman she loved appealed to her a lot more now. Jacob managed fourteen years. I think I can handle a few more days.

Closing her bible, Mary Eunice rolled over, turned off the light, and tugged the blankets up over her shoulder. The old house rocked back and forth with the footsteps of Lana and Helen; their voices echoed, words indistinguishable but tones distinct. God, grant me the serenity to survive these next few days without Lana. Make my future with her all the sweeter because of what we experience here. Give her strength. She sucked her lower lip, tasting the raw texture. Let her grieve. She hasn’t gotten to mourn here. And neither has Helen. Perhaps they can’t be brought together, but—please, bring them peace. Ease their struggles in coming to terms with their losses. Make this leave them both better off, however that might come about.

The door clicked open. Mary Eunice blinked into darkness, at first uncertain she had heard the distinct sound, but then she lifted her head from the pillow and made out a silhouette approaching the bed. “Lana?”

“It’s just me.” Lana crawled into bed beside her. “I can’t sleep without you.”

She placed a hand on Mary Eunice’s waist. Mary Eunice reached across the bed, reciprocating the gesture; she cupped her girlfriend’s hip bone in the palm of her hand. “What about your mother?”

Lana’s soft hair tickled her face where she rested her head on the pillow. “Fuck her.”

In spite of herself, a grin spread on Mary Eunice’s lips. “I can’t. My vows.” Lana choked, shaking the bed with the force of her laughter; she withdrew her hand, covering her mouth, trapping the sound within herself. “I’m sorry. Bad joke.” Mary Eunice nuzzled against Lana’s shoulder, face warm with embarrassment of what she had said. “What if she catches us?”

“I don’t care.” A soft hand tucked her hair behind her ear. “She’ll either accept it or she won’t. I love you. I want to be with you.” She hesitated, and then she continued, “When Wendy died, I had no one. Lois and Barb—they couldn’t do much without risking being outed, and I was alone. I don’t want to grieve alone again. Especially knowing that you’re here, and that I could, if it weren’t for her…” She trailed off. Her breath caught in her throat, and Mary Eunice extended a hand to wipe the tears from her cheeks. “She isn’t worth it. Torturing myself. I deserve—I deserve to have a support system as much as the rest of them. I deserve to love you on top of everything else.”

“I understand.” Mary Eunice drew nearer and pressed a tender kiss to Lana’s cheek. “I love you.” Her arms wandered, blind in their journey, around the flat of Lana’s back. The moist warmth of a tearful cheek met the crook of her neck. Let her cry. She deserves to cry. Smoothing her hands over Lana’s body, Mary Eunice held her like that, even when the weight on her arm made her hand go numb and fingers tingle. Peppering a few light kisses on Lana’s head, Mary Eunice
inhaled the sweet scent of her freshly washed hair, cherishing the way the curves of their bodies fit together in the bed they weren’t meant to share.

When Lana’s sniffs calmed, she whispered her thanks and rested her head on the curve of Mary Eunice’s chest. Mary Eunice twined her fingers with Lana’s hair. “I’m glad you found Terry,” Lana said in a muted voice. “We were afraid Mr. Peyser had caught the two of you. You were gone for so long…”

“You were right.”

“What?” Lana lifted her head. “Mr. Peyser—”

“No, not—not that. No, I mean—you’re right about Terry.” *Maybe I shouldn’t say anything. It’s none of my business.* But the girl’s words weighed on her conscience. Maybe they were nothing. Maybe Terry was perfectly normal. Maybe she would grow up and marry young and have a brood of children just like her mother. *Or maybe she’s facing a future of Lana’s past. Maybe in ten or twelve years, they’ll be throwing her out because she loves women.* “She told me she’s in love with me.”

Lana settled her head back on Mary Eunice’s chest. “Called it.” Her hand grappled around on the pillows before it found a head of blonde hair and threaded through it. “That’s sweet, though. She’s cute.”

“Are you worried?”

“No right now.” Lana muffled a yawn, burying her face into the front of Mary Eunice’s chest. “Frieda promised me she won’t throw out any of her kids. Things change, but—I think she knows better than to tear her family apart. I hope she knows better.”

Silence swallowed them, and then Mary Eunice said, “I love you,” one more time, because the hours of unpleasant company had starved her of opportunities to say it.

“I love you, too, sunshine. Sweet dreams.”

*Never sweeter.* And, for the first time since arriving in Georgia, Mary Eunice closed her eyes and fell fast to sleep with not a buffer or a blink of a nightmare to interrupt her peace.
The sharp clearing of a throat stirred Lana from her peaceful sleep. “Hm?” Bleariness smeared her vision. The sunlight through the window created a yellow mural, bright and happy, the most joy she had seen in a single image in days. Her arm, strewn loosely around Mary Eunice’s waist, curled upward, and she stretched, long and languid. Beside her, her girlfriend didn’t stir from the movement on the mattress. Her pink lips formed an O with drool dribbling out of the corner. In the morning light, all of her scratches from the night before glowed with beads of dried blood. Red lines covered her exposed arms and hands. Her cheeks had cuts and marks where the thorns had pierced her skin. This place hasn’t been kind to either of us.

Lana’s hand lingered mid-air, above Mary Eunice’s golden hair, where she intended to tuck a lock behind her ear, but then she remembered the clearing throat which had woken her. Oh, shit. Her hand froze. Both hands planted on the mattress, Lana pushed herself up and turned to the door, which now stood wide open with her mother in the frame, both hands planted on her hips. Hard narrow eyes fixed upon Lana, who crossed her arms in front of her chest. In the bed, Mary Eunice didn’t stir. Good. She shouldn’t see this. “Do you want us to leave?” Lana asked, voice carefully calm, neutral. I won’t apologize. Not again.

Backing out of the door frame, Helen beckoned her with a single index finger. Like a naughty child, Lana curled her toes into the carpet, following her mother out of the room. The door clicked shut behind her. “I don’t want to wake her.” Lana blinked. Thank you. She didn’t dare interrupt to offer her gratitude for letting Mary Eunice get a few more minutes of sleep. “Does she know?” Know what? Know I like her? Lana gaped until her mother pressed, “Does she know you got in bed with her?”

Oh. She snapped her mouth shut and swallowed the piss-flavored morning breath in her mouth. “Yes, of course.” The critical eyes didn’t leave her. “We live in a one bedroom house. We both have nightmares. We always sleep together.” Setting her jaw, she held fast to her resolve. Her tangled bedhead and pajama-clad body would not ruin this for her. “Frankly, I’m insulted that you think I’d take advantage of her.”

“I didn’t say that.” Biting the tip of her tongue, Lana fought to keep from retorting. She wasn’t being kicked out yet. “Is that all you did?”

No, I stripped my nun out of her habit the day of my father’s funeral and fucked her in his house. I’m trying to piss God off in as many ways as possible. Her sarcasm had never won her any favors with her mother, who, unlike her father, did not find it clever or entertaining. “Yes. I would never do anything to disrespect or harm her. It’s easier to sleep in a strange place with a familiar face. And it’s easier to cry with someone who gives a damn, without everyone watching and judging—don’t say you don’t judge, Mama, I know you do. I can see it on your face.”

She averted her eyes. “You’re right. It is easier. I’ve no right to deprive you just because I’m alone now.”
The hardness inside of Lana, furious at her mother’s intrusion, softened a little. Perhaps the words were manipulative, but sympathy rose from inside of her, nonetheless. “You’re welcome to join us, if that’s what all this is about.”

Helen snorted and rolled her eyes. “Get dressed and help me with breakfast. Tim and Roger are going to be here soon.” She patted Lana on the shoulder. Her bony, wrinkled hand had callouses on the knuckles like Mary Eunice’s. “I know you can’t cook for shit, but you can set the table. Maybe I’ll be generous and throw your dog a bit of old bacon.”

When Lana returned to the room to dress herself, Mary Eunice also rose, and they exchanged a quick peck on the lips before they headed into the kitchen. Mary Eunice’s hair was drawn back in a tight French braid, while Lana’s was down and framing her face. Helen had spread out ingredients all over the countertop in anticipation of the breakfast. “Come here, Sister. You’ve got breadmaking hands.” Breadmaking hands? Is that a compliment? Lana wondered as she got the plates and mugs out of the cabinet. “Do you know how to make biscuits from scratch?”

“Yes, ma’am. How many?”

“Give us a dozen, sweetheart.” Mary Eunice’s cheeks tinted a pleasant pink at the pet name, and the shadows of dread about making bread vanished from her face, replaced by joy. It’s so easy to please her. She just wants to feel welcome. “I would let Lana make them, but then nobody would have biscuits, and at least one of us would have burns.”

Lana circled the kitchen table just like she had as a child, folding the cloth napkins, placing the silverware and glasses on the appropriate sides of the fine china, which was only set out on holidays and special occasions. “Lana is writing the cooking column for the Boston Globe now. I don’t think anyone has died yet.” Mary Eunice tossed all of the ingredients together, stirred them, and then she began pouring in the butter, limbs creating an organized flurry of a skill too well-practiced, a habit pressed into the very fabric of her brain.

Helen preheated the oven and prepared a plate of grits and eggs to cook up together. “Emphasis on the yet.” Her voice had a light lilt to it, teasing at her rather than holding any serious implications. “Someone’s going to get salmonella and sue. It’s not going to be pretty.” Glancing at where Mary Eunice had begun to fold the dough, she narrowed her eyes. “Good Lord—pardon me. How did you do that so fast?”

“Oh.” Mary Eunice’s hands slowed on reflex at the scrutiny. “The sanitarium I served at had a bakery. We had to meet a quota of fresh baked goods every day, and some of the patients weren’t agreeable to aiding us—it always benefited us to finish as quickly as possible. And, well, frankly it’s easier, since none of this is moldy.” Helen choked at her last words, and Lana swallowed the revulsion in her throat. How much mold did I eat while I was there? Somehow, she doubted the demon had taken care to avoid feeding anyone moldy products. Mary Eunice folded the dough one more time and took the cutter to it, screwing it down and lifting it again with the dough trapped inside. “The revenue from the bakery was vital to keep the lights on and the power operable. In my third year, the heat was turned off in mid-January. It took a week for our Monsignor to communicate with the Mother Superior and have the power turned back on. It was so cold, the water froze in the pipes.” She placed each prepared biscuit on the greased cookie sheet.

Lana perked up. She hadn’t heard this story before. “What did you do?” she asked, since Mary Eunice offered no more on the subject.

Blue eyes moved over her shoulder, back at Lana, where she had just finished setting the table. Don’t dilly dally. You’ll get chided. She greased another pan to cook up the country ham, though
she didn’t put it on; she knew better than to take the blame for burning Christmas breakfast. “Well—we moved all of the patients into the dayroom, with the fireplace, except the ones in solitary, who weren’t safe to be around other people. The nuns shared beds so we could give the unused blankets to the patients in solitary, so they wouldn’t freeze to death. And the church set up a drive to donate bottled water and canned goods to us, since we couldn’t cook in the kitchen.”

*Shared beds.* The question burned in Lana’s throat. *Who did you share with?* She didn’t know why she cared, except that it caught her attention, and as a lover of a good story, she required more details to picture everything clearly. In her mind’s eye, she saw Mary Eunice crawling into bed with Sister Jude, both of them barren of their habits and cloaked in nightwear, backs to one another and a large gap between them in the small bed. Like Mary Eunice read her mind, she toyed with the remaining dough. “I was with Sister Jude. She had me stay with her, in the heart of the place, as penance for my broken window, the rest of the year. The cracked pane let in the wind even when the heat was working.”

“That sounds horrible,” Helen said, interrupting Lana’s musings on Jude and Mary Eunice. She stepped out of the way for Mary Eunice to put the biscuits in the oven, and then she put the ham and gravy on. “Timothy and Roger will be here soon. I’m sure they’re ducking out of all cooking responsibilities.” The telephone rang from deeper within the house. “Excuse me, Sister, would you watch the stove?” Mary Eunice nodded. “Thank you.” She fled the room, headed back down the hall toward the phone.

Lana took a spatula. “I’ve got the eggs. I won’t poison anyone, I promise.” She winked up at Mary Eunice. Side by side at the stove, they fit together, near enough to brush arms, though the scent and sound of cooking food muffled their ability to sense one another. “Did you sleep well? No dreams?”

“None. It was very peaceful.”

“Me, too.” The phone ceased its ringing, but Lana couldn’t hear what her mother said in answer. *That’s the first time they’ve gotten a call since we’ve been here. It must be a new thing.* She flattened the sizzling eggs down into the pan and flipped and stirred them as they cooked up into their scrambled yellow hue. “Do you want to leave tomorrow?”

“It doesn’t matter to me, Lana. If you’d like to stay longer, I don’t mind.” Mary Eunice stole a glance at Lana’s cooking; Lana pretended not to notice the lack of faith in her cooking skills. “The weather is fairer here, anyway. It’s nice to have a break from the dreary snow.”

Lana opened her mouth to respond, but Helen screamed, “*Lana!*” Her feet fell heavily on the floor as she stormed up the hallway in a flurry; they both whirled around to face her, hands on their chests to muffle their shock at the address. “What did you do?”

“I—I—” What the hell? Lana blinked and shook her head, trying to clear it. “What do you mean, what did I do? I was standing right here—”

“The sheriff of Boston is on the phone.” *Oh, fuck.* A coldness settled in the pit of Lana’s stomach. Ice hardened in her veins. She hadn’t heard from anyone in the Boston police department since they’d brought her the ashes from Bloody Face’s fireplace, combed neatly into an urn, like smoked woodchips were the same as the body of her lover. Sucking in a tight, short breath through her nose, she placed a hand on the inside of Mary Eunice’s elbow, bracing herself in case of collapse. “Do you care to tell me what this might be about, or am I left to guess?”

Swallowing hard, she measured herself. “I—I don’t know.” She cleared her throat. *It’s probably nothing.* “They had given up searching for remains, last I heard from them, but it’s possible they found something.” *Merry Christmas, Lana, we found your girlfriend’s skull!* “I don’t know. Let
me talk to him.” She brushed her fingertips down the length of Mary Eunice’s sleeve. *Come with me.* She was afraid to speak the words in front of her mother, but Helen stepped out of the way, granting them both enough space to pass through.

Her parents’ bedroom was cast in darkness, the bed made and curtains drawn with finality. Lana sank on the side of the bed and reached for the phone. Mary Eunice sat beside her, saying nothing, offering nothing but an open hand, which Lana accepted, folding her hand into her girlfriend’s; given the privacy, she took the affection she could get. “Hello?”

“Hello. Is this Lana Winters?”

“Yes, this is she.”

“I’m Sheriff Murphy, Boston PD. You and your roommate were reported missing this morning.” *Reported missing?* Lana looked up to Mary Eunice, lips pursed, but Mary Eunice couldn’t hear the officer’s words and only frowned to her with concern in return. “Given the nature of your case, we feared you might’ve been the victims of a hate crime. Is Sister Mary Eunice McKee with you?”

“Yes, sir. Who—Who reported—” The door cracked open, and Mary Eunice and Lana dropped hands like they had grabbed hot coals before Helen could see them. “Who reported us missing?”

“Two women. They claimed they were meant to have Christmas with you this morning, but arrived to find you both missing. They said you hadn’t been in contact with your family for over a decade, but we were running out of leads.”

*Barb and Lois.* Lana gulped the dry lump in her throat. Barb and Lois hadn’t reported Wendy missing when she disappeared, nor had they made any effort to free her from the asylum, fearing prosecution if they came too near to the police and outing themselves. *Now they’ve risked it over nothing.* “Yes, sir, I—I had to come home on an emergency. Sister Mary Eunice came with me. We’re not hurt, and we’re not in any danger. I’m sorry for the trouble.”

“Of course, Miss Winters. If you will, confirm your driver’s license ID number to verify your identity?” Lana got up to find her purse and rifled through it for her wallet, and then she gave him the numbers. “And confirm your date of birth.”

“October 15, 1931.”

“May I speak with Sister Mary Eunice, please?”

Mary Eunice took the phone from Lana, who looked up at her mother; Helen had crossed her arms and wore a stern expression, unforgiving. “Hello?” Mary Eunice paused, and then she said, “Yes, that’s me. I—I’m not licensed to drive.” She sucked on her lower lip in consideration, listening to the man’s words, but her right hand moved to her left and began to pick at the drying scabs. “No, sir, I—um, I don’t know it.” She gulped aloud and gave Lana a nervous look, eyes crinkling at the corners. “No, it’s not that. My parents passed away when I was very young.” Her hand squeezed into a tight fist and then relaxed, trying to find some rhythm in it. Across the room, Helen’s hard look softened with surprise. “Between their home and the orphanage and my adoption, my birth certificate was lost. I was born in the spring of 1937, but that’s—that’s all I know, I’m afraid. I’m sorry, I can’t give you a date.” His reply was inaudible, but Mary Eunice’s face, all crumpled with the shame of having betrayed so much with her side of the conversation. *She should never feel ashamed.* Lana longed to wrap her up in an embrace. “Thank you, officer. Goodbye.”

She placed the phone delicately back on the cradle. “Well?” Lana prompted. “Are you a
confirmed imposter?”

The quiet teasing softened Mary Eunice’s strained face into a dimpled wonder. “Verified. They’re sending an officer to arrest me as we speak. I don’t know how I’ll explain it to the Mother Superior.” Lana chuckled at her retort, but even then, she didn’t dare reach to pat Mary Eunice’s thigh or squeeze her hand in a tiny show of comfort; her mother still looked at them, pitting and judging. It’s not fair. So much was stolen from her. She’s never had a family—she’s never even known how old she is, not really. Merry Christmas, Sister.

The slamming shut of the screen door interrupted their thoughts. “Mama?” Timothy called out. “Mama? Lana? Merry Christmas, y’all! Where y’all hiding?” Helen cleared her throat and headed back up the hall with a final, pitying look left on Mary Eunice which made the hair on the back of Lana’s neck stand up. Does she want any pity?

In the brief absence, the brief privacy allotted to them, she took Mary Eunice’s hand and squeezed it gently. But Mary Eunice didn’t shed a tear. Her soft blue eyes found Lana’s. “Merry Christmas,” she whispered. Merry Christmas. The words were hard to come by—any words at all. Lana kissed her fingertips and pressed them to Mary Eunice’s tender mouth. A Christmas here, without her father, without Wendy and her family, without Frieda, was hardly a family Christmas at all, but it was still busier than any holiday Lana had known for over a decade. So much has changed. Did she want to leave so soon? Yes, I want to go home. She wanted to be with Mary Eunice. But she regretted leaving her mother alone, no matter how much she deserved it. She loathed to think of this house, the place she had grown up, growing quiet and still. There’s nothing we can do about that. She could hardly afford to relocate, if it was even possible for Mary Eunice to move so far away from her order, and she doubted a book about a serial killer terrorizing Boston would take off in a backwoods county of Georgia.

Staying wasn’t an option. But her heart broke for her mother. She had gone through this, too, and she knew how much it hurt. She wasn’t there for me. I can’t be there for her. Even if I would like to be. “Let’s go get something to eat.”

Timothy and Roger greeted them both with embraces; Lana found herself tugged against Roger while Timothy whirled Mary Eunice around like a ballroom dancer, much to her giggling astonishment. “Merry Christmas, Sister!” He pecked her on the cheek. “I know we’re not quite a convent, but I hope you’re not too disappointed by our humble family celebration.” Mary Eunice flushed a pale pink shade, trying to stammer her way through her blushing gratitude. “And I got you a little something.” He reached into his pocket and tugged out a long necklace—if one called it that, for it was simply a handmade charm on a string of worn leather. “As a sorry for nearly killing you and also a thank you for saving Frieda’s kid.”

In the morning light streaming through the window, Lana stepped nearer to examine the necklace. With some copper wire, Timothy had wired together two nails, each one braced on the other’s flat end, and a third nail intersected the two, forming a cross. The nails had been polished and the sharp edges dulled. “Oh, my word—it’s beautiful.” Mary Eunice covered her mouth with her hands as he held up the charm to the light. “I—I can’t accept this.” Her throat bobbed, and with it, a thick sheen of tears appeared in her eyes. Oh, my love. Time had wrought her against ever receiving gifts, and Timothy had made her something heartfelt and genuine. “It’s—It’s too much.”

“It’s three nails and some copper wire on a leather string, Sister.” Timothy grinned. “It’s worth nothing more than an hour of my labor. I thought you would like it.” He held it out to her again, giving an encouraging nod, so she held out her hand, and the necklace pooled in her palm. “Merry Christmas. We’re glad to have you.”

She gulped aloud, stifling her tears. “Thank you.” She folded her fingers around the charm like she fingered her rosary for a prayer. “Thank you,” she said again. “I’ve never had anything like it.
before. It’s so beautiful.” Timothy swept her into a hug. Squeaking with surprise, she fell against
him, and then she hugged him in return, misty eyes blinking where she rested her chin on his
shoulder. “Merry Christmas.”

She’s so precious. As Mary Eunice tugged back away from Timothy, Lana took the necklace
from her closed hand. “Let me put it on you.” Timothy didn’t have an understanding of jewelry,
so the necklace had no clasp, but rather the loose ends had knots to keep the charm from sliding
off. Lana tied the ends together in a neat bow so the charm crafted of nails fell right at the base of
Mary Eunice’s throat. “I didn’t know you were such a poet, Timmy.” He smiled, but as she
arched an eyebrow, it ebbed. “Do you have a thing for blondes?”

He blinked, taken aback. Mary Eunice swatted her on the arm. “Lana!” she said, aghast. “That’s
incredibly unkind.”

“And as a matter of fact, I prefer redheads. With freckles and green eyes. No offense, Sister, but
you’re not my type.”

Mary Eunice fingered the cross made of nails. “None taken,” she chimed.

Helen headed out of the kitchen, leaning against the wall with a cocked hip. “That’s a pretty
specific type, Tim.” He flushed a faint shade of pink and glared at Lana, furious. “Have you got
someone in particular in mind?” His lips sputtered and stammered, so she held up a hand to him.
“It’s alright. I don’t need to know. Just put a ring on her before you knock her up, please and
thank you. It’s about time one of you got a move on getting a woman, anyway. C’mon, kids, let’s
eat.”

After she turned her back, Timothy and Roger exchanged a concerned look. Lana pursed her lips.
There’s something going on between them. She lifted her eyes to Roger. “Later,” he mouthed
silently, before he followed their mother into the kitchen. They said they wanted to take us to town
today. Maybe that has something to do with it. Mary Eunice had a questioning gaze pressed to her
back, but she shook her head, and like that, they all dropped the matter without another remark
upon it.

Timothy and Roger had both chipped in on bottle of expensive perfume for their mother. “We
know you’re always fussing about only being able to afford toilet-water type off-brands, so we
thought we’d get you something to wear to church. No more being embarrassed around the other
wives, right?” Roger said over the eggs, and Helen kissed him on the cheek. “We love you,
Mama.”

“Now, you two better not have left your sister out.”

“What sister?” Timothy asked, but he winked in Lana’s direction. “Don’t worry, Mama, we
wouldn’t do something like that. Lana would kill us.” He emptied his right pocket, tugging out a
familiar ring of gold and battered knife. “You know, it’s a tradition to pass this stuff down, a
bunch of the stuff from great grandpa’s Civil War days. There’s his army knife, and his wedding
band, and then there’s grandpa’s dog tags from the first war.” He cleared his throat. “It’s
traditional for the stuff to go to the oldest son, but, you know, since there were two of us, and,
well, Daddy always wanted you to be a son anyway, and you were the one named after him, we
figured—well, we figured he would’ve wanted you to have them.”

Lana blinked. Her mind buffered like a skipping record with a misplaced needle, unable to
compute everything Timothy had just said. Her eyes darted up to Roger, who nodded along in
agreement. “I—I—I’m flattered, really, but—these are heirlooms.” Her heart skipped a beat as the
words escaped, not a protest she wanted to give, but something she knew she had to say. She had
not been a member of this family for fifteen years, and though she had not chosen to leave them,
she did not deserve to inherit the precious items of her family history. “They’re meant to stay within the family, and I’m—I’m not going to have children. They would die with me, a thousand miles away from here.”

Her mother pouted. “You never know what the future will bring, Lana. God may bless you with a child yet. You can’t lose hope.”

God already sent His blessings. I didn’t appreciate them. Lana bit the tip of her tongue. She didn’t want to spend Christmas morning having a plate thrown at her head. “I’m a little old to be the next Virgin Mary, Mama.” She cut into her eggs and took a bite from them, trying to keep her mouth full to keep from saying too much and starting an argument. Mary Eunice’s eyes darted to her over the table, but they didn’t linger long enough to draw any attention or evoke suspicion.

A frown burrowed into the creases of Roger’s face, settling between his brows. “Would it really be virgin, though?” he asked. “I mean—You could be lesbian Mary, but that would be a first. Maybe that’s how God will release a new updated Bible.” Oh, for fuck’s sake, Roger. Lana rolled her eyes to the ceiling. He cut up his bacon into bits and slipped them under the table to Gus, and she pretended not to notice; he hadn’t had a good snack since they’d left. “I don’t think it’s a big deal, Lana, honestly. You can do what you like with them at the end of your life, if that means giving them to Frieda’s children, or if we wind up having some—or if that means letting the line die with you. We want you to have them now. Not indefinitely in the future. Daddy didn’t think you would be here, so he didn’t leave you anything. It’s not fair to you for us to leave you out. If he had known, he wouldn’t have, and he wouldn’t like us doing it, either. These are yours. Merry Christmas.”

He slid the knife across the table with the wedding band and the two dog tags bearing her grandfather’s name. The knife was battered and the wedding band dented, but both held an ethereal glow of sheer age. Over a hundred years had passed since her great grandfather had carried the knife into war. The wedding band had come off of his finger following his death before she was born. The dog tags were all that remained of her grandfather when they had pulled his burned limbs from the battlefield; she had never met him. “Thank you,” she said, unable to lift her eyes from the treasured antiques. “Both of you. You don’t have to give me anything. I wasn’t here.”

“It wasn’t because you didn’t want to be, though.”

To her surprise, her mother said, “That was our mistake. My mistake.” She nodded to the battered items on the table. “Take them, unless you want Tim to make himself into an Indian giver.”

The metal was cold as Lana wrapped her hands around the items. “Thank you.” She tucked them into her purse, which hung on the back of her kitchen chair.

The rest of their meal passed in relative silence, and when they finally pushed back from the table, Timothy said, “C’mon, let’s run to town while everything is calm. We wanna show you everything that’s changed—and Sister Mary Eunice has gotta see our southern hospitality. Ain’t much open today, but the gas station or something outta have some boiled peanuts for us to grab. Ever had boiled peanuts, Sister?”

Mary Eunice pursed her lips. “I—I wasn’t aware anyone ever had the idea to boil nuts.” She smoothed her hand over her sweater and skirt. “I could stay and help clean,” she offered, looking to Helen instead, but the older woman waved her off.

“But don’t be silly, dear. You’re a guest. You go to town. People will think you sound real posh and fancy up in the county streets. You got one of them pretty Yankee accents. You’ll have the country boys drooling for you.” Mary Eunice’s hands wrung in front of her body, and Helen
perked up. “Oh, sugar, I don’t mean to scare you. I’m teasing. Ain’t no man around here would put a hand on you, and that’s a promise. They might think you’re something else, but they won’t bother you. Go on, I’ll clean up.”


Mary Eunice hesitated outside of Lana’s car, uncertain if she had the privilege of the front seat. The veil of her habit was in the floor of the car where she had discarded it yesterday, after the funeral. Qualms forgotten, she climbed inside and donned the coif and veil, tugging them over her braid. Perhaps they looked misplaced without the rest of her black habit, but she didn’t care; her habit was in the laundry, and she wanted the safety provided by the veil, what it granted to her—the way it promised her to God and simultaneously told the world of her status. *I belong to God, and I belong to Lana, and I am available to no one else.* As Lana slid into the seat beside her, Mary Eunice smiled up at her, sheepish in the sudden recollection of her girlfriend’s discomfort with her religious garb.

But Lana’s face didn’t turn at the sight of her. Rather, concern followed. “Is something wrong?” she asked in a murmur while Timothy and Roger hung outside the car, smoking cigarettes before their trip. “Why are you covering? We’re not going to church.”

“I—I know, I…” *I don’t understand it.* Mary Eunice nibbled on her lower lip. Helen’s words were teasing, a mere quip, but she couldn’t shake the image of the pastor from her mind. The thought of seeing him again tonight at the Christmas pageant and party sickened her, and she knew she would veil if she could, though she doubted her habit would be ready.

Lana touched the underside of her chin and tilted her head up, soft brown eyes holding her own. “She was just joking. She’s right. No one around here would hurt you. You’re with two cops. They might be my goofy little brothers, but they’re still officers. They won’t let anyone come near either of us.” She licked her thumb and wiped away at the corner of Mary Eunice’s lips. “You’ve got some—something. Dirt, looks like.”

When Lana released her face, Mary Eunice averted her eyes. “I know, it’s silly, I just…” She pinched the tip of her tongue between her teeth. *I don’t want her to feel guilty.* It was irrational—Lana had no responsibility for the pastor who had intimidated her nor any control over him. “It’s nothing.” She couldn’t shake the notion, nonetheless. The man set her stomach amiss, triggered all of her instincts to run for the hills, filled with distrust for a man who claimed to love God and rape women in the same breath. Lana set her jaw. “It’s the pastor. At the church, I can’t—” Her breath trembled. “I can’t stop thinking of him. What he said. I just feel safer this way.”

A certain sad softness came to Lana’s face. She touched Mary Eunice’s hand and rubbed the back of it. “I understand. Do you have your rosary?” Mary Eunice nodded. “Good. Keep it. I know it makes you feel better.” Lana withdrew her hand and opened her purse, fumbling around inside of it. It took her only a moment of reaching inside to pull out the ring her brother had just given her, the heirloom. *It’s so pretty.* It was simple, but for Mary Eunice, who had nothing of her family at all, its beauty couldn’t be described. Lana took her hand again, this time unfurling her fingers off of her thighs and leaving the spidery digits drawn out. *My manly hands.* Lana said they were elegant. With that thought, Lana slid the ring onto her finger, beside her commitment band which marked her a member of the church, a bride of Christ. The man’s ring was too large for her. It slid right off of her ring finger. But Mary Eunice hooked out her thumb, and Lana pushed her antique ring onto her shortest digit, where it caught right below the knuckle.

They both chuckled. Warmth flowed up from Mary Eunice’s chest and covered her face. *I love her so much.* She longed to lean forward and kiss Lana, but her brothers grabbed the car doors,
and they separated, an invisible wedge driving between them, Lana ripping the ring away from her. Tobacco smoke exhaled from their lips and filled the car with the rancid stench. “Okay, where are we going?” Lana asked, dropping the ring into her purse again. “Which direction?”

“Town,” Roger said. “Post office. It hasn’t moved.”

“The post office is closed today.”

“Roger is meeting someone there,” Timothy said. Lana sent them a skeptical look in the rearview mirror. “Town hasn’t changed much. But—well, we gotta talk to you. Without Mama breathing down our necks. Car trip seemed the best way to get it done.” Lana muttered something under her breath which Mary Eunice couldn’t quite make out. Timothy peeked at Mary Eunice in the mirror. “Sister, you don’t have any religious obligation to tell our Mama all our secrets, do you?”

Shaking her head, Mary Eunice said in a whisper, “She—She actually scares me.”

Roger laughed, but his voice had gone up the octave with anxiety, and he couldn’t stop fidgeting in the back seat. “She scares all of us. We all thought she was gonna put us in an early grave at some point. Daddy always said that he was going to die of a heart attack one day because of her.” He sat back against the seat, crossing his arms, puffing up a little. “We do want to go around town, though, Lana. What we’re doing isn’t that big of a deal, really—it’s just someone I think you ought to see, or rather, something I want your opinion on…”

As Lana drove out of the driveway and up to the main road, she said, “The more you ramble, the worse I’m going to expect it to be.” Roger snapped his jaws shut at Lana’s teasing words. What could it possibly be? Lana’s brothers were stand-up men, serving as police officers in their community, sitting by their father’s bedside until his death—she couldn’t imagine Roger having done something so awful to warrant his nervousness. Don’t trust him. Don’t trust anyone. Dr. Thredson was a stand-up man. You never know what someone is doing. She glanced at Lana out of the corner of her eye, trying to gauge her reaction to Roger’s strange behavior, but Lana’s expression was unreadable, like it turned when she remembered and needed to tuck it into the deepest recesses of her mind to protect herself. It’s bothering her, too.

The car ride was silent, so Lana turned on the radio into a soft hum to fill the silence. The bright sun hung low in the sky, hardly indicative of any winter weather, and the warm inside of the car made her sweater almost unnecessary. The dull, barren forest blurred by in the window, and Mary Eunice could scarcely keep her eyes from watching everything whisk by her, more scenic than anything she had seen since arriving at Lana’s house. Lana lived in the city—Gus was the most wildlife she had experienced since leaving Briarcliff, except for that rabbit that had bitten her when he caught it. The wild, untamed forest reminded Mary Eunice of the woods behind Briarcliff, with which she had become well-acquainted in her many excursions to feed the raspers and occasionally to watch the deer—watch, but never touch, never draw so near to alert them to her presence, never do anything to upset their peaceful grazing. They brought her peace, what little she could see of them, and she always felt nearer to God when she observed their natural habits and marveled at the beauty of the world allotted to her. She had little, but she could see. She could watch the newborn fawns lumber after their mothers and relax in the open field. I feel the same way, looking at Lana, that I did when I watched the deer. She makes me feel like that. At peace. Closer to God. Holier. Happier. She could not explain it, but she adored it nonetheless.

The silent town made the trees break in places, first just for a few houses, then for an occasional business, then the road widened and the speed limit dropped. An open diner had a smattering of pickup trucks in the parking lot, but otherwise, nothing in the small city showed signs of life. Bright bows and wreaths adorned the light poles and stoplights all around. This is a nice place. All of the vehicles they passed waved from behind the wheel with friendly smiles. Boston would never be so hospitable. Mary Eunice smiled in spite of herself and waved back at a man on a
bicycle, who tipped his cowboy hat to her in return. “Don't enjoy yourself too much, Sister,” Lana teased from the driver's seat. “Southern hospitality is addictive.”

Face warming, Mary Eunice sat back against the seat again. “I've never had anyone so excited to see me. Except Gus, maybe,” Lana and her brothers all laughed, a joyous sound, celebratory of the season. *It wasn't the type of Christmas I wanted, but I can't imagine it being any better than this. If only we could have each other.* She wouldn't attend mass today, and she would surely confess for it as soon as she could, but she didn't regret the absence of ministry in her life today. Sometimes there were more important things. *God would rather me be here, supporting the woman I love. He wouldn't have sent me here if it wasn't His intention.*

Lana turned from an intersection and parked in the vacant parking lot of an intersection across from a humble city hall. “Alright,” she said, “who are we waiting for you to meet?” She and Mary Eunice both looked to Roger in the rearview mirror, a question of the vacancy of the parking lot, but he nodded across the open stretch of gravel and concrete to the shape of a black woman rounding the corner. The short, chubby form wore a thick knit cap and gloves in spite of the rather fair temperatures. *She must've walked quite a way to need all of those layers. It isn't that chilly unless you're in the wind.*

Lana whirled in her seat to look at Roger, to question him, but he stepped out of the car and left the rest of them in silence. “Timothy?” Lana's scrutiny fixed upon her other brother instead. “Care to fill me in?” Timothy shrugged, feigning innocence, offering nothing to assuage her anxiety. Heaving a sigh, Lana gazed back out to the scene. Roger embraced the unfamiliar woman, and they exchanged a kiss on the lips. “Holy shit.” Lana lifted a hand to her temple, fingers pressed there. She licked her lips. “I can't believe—Jesus Christ.” *What's the problem? Mary Eunice.* Lana pursed her lips in confusion. She wasn't a racist. She was friends with Jasmine and Katherine. She was the godmother of Kit’s black daughter. Why would she have a problem with her brother having an interracial relationship? *She's hardly got the high ground, anyway. They could get married, if they wanted to. We won't ever have that opportunity.*

Lana warmed all of Mary Eunice's soft inside parts, and she swallowed a flame under her tongue to stifle the idealistic thoughts. The couple exchanged wrapped packages which they had stuffed in their coats. From the distance, she couldn't see what they had given to one another for Christmas, but they both laughed, and they squeezed each other tight once again.

Roger and the woman approached the car. Lana's troubled expression vanished with a blink; her journalistic facade returned without a struggle. He opened the back door of the car. “Hey, Lana, this is Beth. Beth, you know Timothy—this is my sister, Lana, and her friend, Sister Mary Eunice.” Beth gave a half-wave to each of them, which they returned with smiles not quite as nervous as hers. Her eyes kept darting to Lana. *She saw the way Lana was looking at her.* “Beth walked here from home. Do you mind driving her? It's a little cool.”

Her face fell, panic striking her wide eyes. “Oh, Roger, no—I couldn't be any trouble—it's not that far. I'll be fine—"

“Don't worry! It's no trouble. I don't mind.” Lana flashed a smile, this one apologetic. *She's scared. Who wouldn't be? Mary Eunice imagined herself, how afraid she would be if someone invited her into a car full of men, how hard she would try to avoid it, the excuses she would fathom. We're not men, but we might as well be. *“We need to drive the car around a bit. Make sure everything is running after our long trip. If the transmission is going to fall out, I want it to go out before we're stuck somewhere in North Carolina. C’mon in.”*"

Beth gave Roger an intimidated look, but he held the door open, so she crawled inside with a reluctant shadow deep on her face. “Thank you kindly, ma'am,” she whispered, like she couldn't quite convince her vocal cords to operate in the proverbial lions den. Roger folded into the seat
beside her, and Lana cranked the car and pulled back out onto the street, listening to Roger’s instruction to take a left. “I’m awful sorry for your loss, miss. I hope your children are handling it alright.”

Lana and Mary Eunice both nearly choked. “I’m Roger’s other sister,” Lana clarified. “Not Frieda.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Beth frowned at Roger. “You didn’t tell me you have two sisters.”

“Lana lives in Boston,” Timothy said. “She’s a big university type deal. She writes for this big newspaper there. The Boston Herald —”


Timothy waved her off. “Same thing. You inherited the family brain cell, is the point I was making. I was trying to compliment you.”

Beth cracked a small smile in the rearview mirror, making brief eye contact with Mary Eunice. She’s pretty. She had a gap between her front teeth. I see what Roger likes about her. She had never thought of women in these terms before meeting Lana; she couldn’t remember a time when she had looked at another woman and thought about her beauty in anything more than vague concepts. She had always found women beautiful, of course, but loving Lana made things more crystalline. “I didn’t think you looked with child, miss, but it’s none of my business. You talk awful proper English, you know.”

Chuckling, Lana stopped at an intersection. “It’s an acquired skill. I would never have found a job up north if I talked like I’d never opened a dictionary. Northerners don’t understand southern folk.” Timothy laughed, tossing his head back, and Beth also offered a muted giggle. “In Boston, we have a drive-through restaurant—it had just opened when we first moved there—”

Roger rolled his eyes. “We’re not culture-less vultures, you know. We have drive-ins.”

“Not a drive- in , a drive- through . You speak into a microphone to tell the person what you want, and you drive around the restaurant to pick it up from the window. They’re a newfangled thing. Wendy wanted to try it to feel like a real California girl. So I drove around this place and told ‘em I wanted two cheeseburgers, two things of fries, and two chocolate shakes. Seems pretty simple, you would think—anybody who wasn’t born yesterday can suss out that meaning.” Roger pointed down a dirt side road, which Lana turned on, bumping on down the road back into a shock of trees, though this forest wasn’t as clean as the one by Lana’s house. Trash littered the road and the ditches, broken glass bottles crunching under the tires. “The clerk could not understand a damn thing I said. I repeated it three times before we parked and went in the damn place to get our food. We never tried a drive-through again.”

“That’s crazy,” Beth said. “People ought to have some sense. You’d think a big city like that would have some culture.”

“In Boston, you gotta sell your soul to get sweet tea in a restaurant.” The others laughed, but Lana’s eyes darted across the seat to Mary Eunice, and they locked gazes. Yeah, it might get you thrown out. Mary Eunice didn’t say the words—they had no place here, especially with a stranger, who had no knowledge of Lana, of why she had left Georgia, of why Roger hadn’t told anyone he had more than one sister. It might get you beaten up. “Yankees don’t make sweet tea right, anyway. Sister Mary Eunice made some and gave herself a stomachache.”

In the back seat, Roger and Beth teased one another’s hands, fingers threading together and then spinning apart. She had rough hands in spite of the delicate shape of her fingers, hard places and
callouses marking her pale palms. Her small hands fit into Roger’s grip. “I bet that sent you to confession, eh, Sister?” he joked.

Almost. “My priest said that, while drinking the watery equivalent of pancake syrup is not good for your health, it doesn’t qualify as a sin.” It wasn’t a lie, though she had mentioned it to Father Joseph in a counseling session, not the priest at the parish they attended in confession. Her cheeks flushed when everyone in the backseat chuckled at her addition to the conversation. Beth made another comment about her accent, but she hardly heard it. I like this. Belonging to a family is nice. Did she miss having a family in Boston? She hadn’t considered them when she had run away. Smoothing a hand over her veil, she hummed to herself. Did I throw them away? Guilt flared alive inside of her. Patricia… Swallowing hard, she averted her eyes, staring out the window. She had run away, and Patricia had died. Don’t think about that right now. You’re stupid for bringing yourself down. Shoving those awful thoughts down made her ache, but even after confession and confiding in Lana and in Father Joseph, she couldn’t shake the guilt and grief. Did she deserve to be here, with a family not her own, during the holidays? When she knew nothing of the family who had accepted her and raised her, except that they were separated?

Gentle fingertips grazed her kneecap. Jerking to attention, Mary Eunice glanced to Lana, whose dark eyes kissed her cheek where her lips could not. She can see me brooding. Her hand moved out of her lap into the neutral zone between them, and Lana clutched her fingertips. They kept their hands low, out of sight, hidden from the other people in the car who would still judge them in spite of everything. “Am I turning up here to head to the trailer park?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m in 203.”

“Groovy.”

The trees split around a clearing with a serpentine dirt road through it, each road passing by mobile homes—more than Mary Eunice had ever seen before in her life. Most of them had dirt splashed up on the sides. The scent of someone grilling wafted through the car, and smoke rose up from the back corner of the park, where a bunch of barefoot kids ran to and fro. A few children roamed on bicycles. A pregnant woman strung up clothes on a line behind one of the trailers. “What is this place?” Mary Eunice didn’t mean to ask the question aloud, and she clamped her lips tight together after it escaped, but she couldn’t suck it back in.

Roger said, “It’s a trailer park. Crop up in the forties during the war when they were mass-produced. Cheaper to keep up than a regular property, and closer to the city for work. They don’t have them in Boston?” He had looped his thumb and Beth’s into a hook formation, tugging against one another.

Lana shook her head. “Nah, Boston’s almost all apartments. If you want property, you’ve got to get out of the city.” She stopped for a group of boys chasing a runaway ball to cross in front of her car, and then she rolled onward. Mary Eunice watched the numbers on the houses gradually go up. “Wendy and I needed the privacy, so we settled for a cheap suburb right outside the big parts of the city. It’s better than taking care not to breathe too loud for the neighbors downstairs. We had enough of that in college.”

“I can’t imagine living in closer quarters than this,” Beth said. “One morning we woke up to find a white man passed out on our couch. Reckon he’d just waltzed in the wrong trailer in the middle of the night. Scared us all half to death.” Lana stopped in front of the trailer with the number Beth had given. “Thank you kindly, Miss Winters.” Roger kissed her once on the lips. “I’ll call you, alright?” She climbed out of the car and headed up the unfinished porch and into the mobile home.

In her absence, silence filled the car; the tension which had crackled from Lana before Beth entered returned tenfold. “If Mama knew we were here, she’d have all of our heads on sticks.”
Exhaling long through his nose, Roger nodded in agreement. Lana hadn’t yet shifted the car into gear; they idled in front of Beth’s tiny home. “What’s the plan? Are you going to tell her or wait until she dies? It’s not fair to that girl to treat her like a secret. And Mama would bust an organ if she knew.”

“I can’t wait for her to die,” Roger whispered. “Beth’s gonna have a baby. We’ve got until July—or, before then, I reckon, when her family has gotta know…”

Lana choked. “Her family doesn’t know either?” He shook his head. “Y’all are going to get yourselves hurt, or killed, or worse. People around here ain’t normal about this sort of shit.” A distinct southern twang returned to her voice, somehow elicited by her surroundings and her irritation at the situation. “What are you planning to do?”

“I don’t know.” Roger’s voice became small. “I was planning on asking you, actually. What do you think I should do? What would you do?”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Lana’s face screwed up. Mary Eunice bit her lower lip. She knew that feeling better than she liked to admit. Lana, whether she liked it or not, was the older sibling. There was no expiration date on her younger counterparts requesting her advice. Perhaps her role modeling could’ve used some work, but she still sat here with her adult brother, trying to think of something to tell him in an impossible situation. “What I think—well, fuck, I think you shouldn’t have knocked her up, that’s what I think. You should’ve known this couldn’t end well.”

Timothy said, “That’s rich, Lana—you ran off with Wendy!”

“I didn’t get Wendy pregnant.” Lana sucked on her lower lip. This isn’t going well. Mary Eunice picked at her arm through the sleeve of her sweater. “Christ. I knew I fucked up, but there were supposed to be three other people to do right by Mama and Daddy. I’m the fuck-up kid, and the rest of you were supposed to be normal. Did you not get that memo?”

Roger’s brows quirked together. “Tim’s seeing someone, too.”

Timothy scowled at his twin, but Lana held up a hand. “Please, for the love of god, tell me she’s white. Mama won’t cut you out of holidays if she’s white.” Neither of them spoke. “What’s her name? One of you has got to say something. What’s her name?”

The silence broke. “Andrew.” Lana shifted the car into gear and drove away. Both of her hands turned into white-knuckled fists on the steering wheel. The car rattled too hard over the holes in the road; she drove too fast. “Lana?” Timothy whispered. “He is—He is white.” Her chin flexed, tightened, and her foot pushed the pedal deeper into the floorboards of the car. “He has red hair and big green eyes. He works in the department with us.”

Her voice choked when she finally managed some words. “Is it because of me?”

“What?”

The tightness in her throat refused to loosen. Mary Eunice gulped, nervous from the speed of the trees jetting by and the pinched texture to Lana’s voice. “Did I give you some idea of being a rebel? When they chased me away? Had you even thought of it before then?”

Timothy blinked, and then he shook his head. “Yeah.” Sarcasm dripped from his voice like thick honey. “Yeah, Lana, I caught your queer germ. You know, my whole life, I thought women were nice—you get to marry them and have kids and not be chased out of the family—but then you took off with Wendy, so I said, ‘Hell, I might like a dick up my ass!’ That’s what happened!”

Lana’s throat bobbed with a tight swallow. “Jesus. Do you know what it did to me? Watching
what they did to you? I was sixteen! It took me years to—to even make eye contact with a man. Nothing about what happened to you was goddamn enticing.”

Her nostrils flared. This isn’t good for her. Lana scooted her hand farther down the steering wheel, leaving sweaty streaks in the wake of her palms. Mary Eunice fumbled with her rosary in the pocket of her skirt. “Lana,” she whispered. “Lana, slow down, please.” The courage to look at the speedometer left her, but she clutched her rosary in one hand and the handle on the door of the car in the other. The next pothole ripped through the whole car. Roger bounced in the back seat, almost knocking his head on the roof of the car, but he didn’t make a sound of protest. The tension had robbed him of his voice.

Still, her quiet instruction made Lana brake, the car gliding to a lower speed. “Sorry.” I want to comfort you. I don’t know what to do. She placed her hand, knuckles closed around her rosary, on the tender part of Lana’s upper thigh. Lana eased her hand from the steering wheel and placed it over hers. Her skin is so sweaty. Mary Eunice trailed the tip of her thumb over Lana’s knuckle. “I’m sorry,” she said, louder, to her brothers. “You’re right. I don’t have the right to accuse either of you of anything. I think you’re both idiots, but that’s never going to change. Roger, I…” She paused, considering. “I think you need to leave with her. Get married, and get the hell out of dodge. Go as far north as you can. Nowhere is safe, but you’ll be better off up north. Nobody will try to throw your kid out of school, or shoot at you, or do anything like the ridiculous hicks out here might try.”

“You know that would kill Mama.”

“Well, a lot of things kill Mama. She’ll either decide she loves you or she’ll decide she loves her prejudices more. That goes for both of you. And it might take her twenty years to come to terms with shit. You’ve got to take care of your family.” Lana looked up to them in the rearview mirror. “It’s going to be okay. I know that sounds really stupid right now, but—it’s the truth. Life goes on without her in it. She doesn’t want you to think the world will keep turning, but it does. And sometimes the sun is a lot brighter for the lack of her, or for the happiness you get that she would deprive you of.”

A tiny smile flexed onto Roger’s lips. A sheen of tears glowed on the surface of his eyes. “Thank you, Lana. I’m glad you came home.”

Timothy perked up. “Hey,” he said, “if you move out, Andy can move into the apartment with me instead. Hell, thanks, Lana, giving him ideas that benefit the both of us.” He flashed a grin at them, and the interior of the car dissolved into some hapless giggles releasing nervous energy, the rough journey of Christmas day only behind them as far as they could outrun it.

…

Later that night, with the night sky twinkling high above them, Mary Eunice followed Lana into the sanctuary of the church, hair still wrapped and veiled from sight, though the rest of her outfit didn’t align with the piece of her habit. They found Frieda and John in the front of the large room, the twins between them and Rex sleeping in Frieda’s arms. The rest of the kids, participants in the pageant, were nowhere in sight. Lana sat beside her sister, legs crossed under her long skirt, and Mary Eunice sank into the pew beside her. Helen sat to her right. I wonder what they’re going to perform. Mary Eunice’s hands wrung in front of her. The Baptist church was strange—it didn’t have as many rules and formalities as the Catholic church, but with that came even more of a fear of doing something wrong. Am I allowed to take communion here? Lana hadn’t known she wasn’t allowed to take communion in the Catholic church because she wasn’t a member. Did Protestants have those sorts of rules? Would she even know any of the prayers? They didn’t use rosaries here; following the confrontation with the minister yesterday, she had left her rosary at home. I don’t even see him now. Perhaps he was helping the children prepare for their performance. At the
thought of him, though, Mary Eunice scooted a bit nearer to Lana.

Helen patted her thigh. “Don’t worry so much, dear. You’ll be fine. They put on the same show every year. Except this year, they got a new baby Jesus, because the last one was so old that his eyes would pop out. Nothing quite like Jesus's eyeballs rolling across the floor. The kid playing Mary said, ‘It’s a Christmas miracle!’ and popped ‘em back in.” Mary Eunice smiled at the thought. “Everybody counted their dimes this year to chip in on a new baby Jesus so the old one could find himself safe in retirement. It seemed fairer to him.”

As if on cue, three small children walked onto the stage, all wearing fake beards and tattered robes fashioned from burlap sacks. “Lo!” said Bruce, pointing up to the ceiling. “A star! ‘Tis a sign from God! We must follow and go to the newborn king!” Two of the kids marched away, but the third lingered, waving at someone seated behind Mary Eunice frantically, and the whole sanctuary burst out into a series of laughs while Bruce grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away. The piano off to the side played an introduction, and a choir of children came from behind the baptismal, singing off-key. “We three kings of orient are bearing gifts, we traverse afar. Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star!”

Frieda’s kids stood out from the crowd, Cindy decked out in full sheep costume, while Terry lingered off to the side with a babydoll in her arms, beside an unfamiliar girl wearing a beard and dragging a stick donkey. The rest of the kids ran off-stage when the song ended, leaving Terry there with her friend. “Joseph, are we there yet?”

“You’ll know when we get there, Mary. There will be buildings and stuff. Oh, look! It’s Bethlehem!” Everyone promptly sang “O Little Town of Bethlehem” and a few teenagers dragged a makeshift shack onto the stage where Terry, the girl playing Joseph, and all of the kids playing livestock gathered in front of a cradle and sang “Away in a Manger”.

The three wise men approached the stable. As Bruce kneeled down in front of the manger, though, Cindy stood up and tugged on his arm. “Not now, Cindy!” he hissed. “Sit down! You’re playing the sheep!” She bit her lower lip and sank back down. “I bring you gold, he brings you frankincense, and he brings you myrrh. We bow to the newborn king, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, born in a stable.”

However, Cindy didn’t quiet down. She instead turned to Terry and tugged on baby Jesus’s arm to get her attention. “Terry—” Now her tearful voice rose up. “Terry, I gotta potty.” The stage had gone silent as their quiet sheep rose up and pronounced her needs. “Terry, I gotta potty! ‘S a ‘mergency!”

“Oh, no—” Frieda nudged John beside her. “Go help. John, go help them!”

Terry dropped baby Jesus and scooped up her sister, who was more than half her size, and lugged her off the stage. “We’ll be right back!” she shouted to the choir. “Keep going without us! My sister’s gotta potty!”

The girl playing Joseph picked up the baby doll—half of him, as his head had fallen off when Terry dropped him. “Terry! You broke Jesus!” The piano did another introduction to cover the commotion on stage, and a few of the children began to sing along to “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen” but others cried, pronouncing that Christmas was ruined. Frieda kept elbowing John, but after a consistent lack of response, she huffed and got up from the pew herself to follow her daughters. With his wife’s movement, John snapped out of his reverie and pursued her, twins in tow, leaving a vacancy in the seats.

Mary Eunice squinted up at the spectacle. Lana hid her laughter behind her hand, eyes crinkled at the corners and tears budding there. A few parents charged up to the stage to save their crying
toddlers. One of the other wise men pushed Bruce. “You stole my line! I was supposed to say frankincense! You stole my line!” He pushed back.

“What was it Frieda was saying about her kids becoming famous actors?” Helen whispered. “They’ve sure got a leg up on John Wayne, don’t they?” Lana doubled over in her seat, fighting to keep her laughter muffled, and each sound rolling from her evoked deep snickers from Mary Eunice’s stomach, which she stifled by biting the tip of her tongue. It shouldn’t be funny. This is Christmas. This has got to be sacrilegious. Her eyes stung from laughing. Is Christmas supposed to be like this? Is it always like this? “They decapitated baby Jesus. That’s a new low for this year.”

Pastor Johnson scrambled on stage, clearing his throat. “Sorry—Sorry, sorry, everyone. Children, children, please, go back to your mamas and daddies. We still have to have dessert! One day we’ll have this Christmas pageant thing nailed down, I swear.” The lights came back on in the sanctuary. He scanned the pews. As his eyes swept the pews, Mary Eunice ducked her head, hoping to hide herself and her veiled hair from view, but she couldn’t move quite fast enough; his eyes locked with hers and held her, fixed in place. She sucked in a tight breath through her nose, like he had slapped her with his gaze.

Helen tensed beside her. Lana placed a light hand on her thigh. Both of them followed her gaze back to the minister. With all three of them staring at him, he looked away from her back to the congregation. Her fear-induced paralysis faded. “That man’s gotta stick somewhere nobody should have one,” Helen muttered. “You keep close to us, he won’t bother you none.”

The congregation headed into the lobby, where people had set up punch and cookies iced like Santa Claus and presents and crosses and stars. A radio hummed on one side of the large room, enticing the older people to swing into a slow dance, but Mary Eunice stuck to Lana’s side like glue. I don’t like the way he looks at me. Her instincts quivered against the minister, against the way he examined her like a piece of meat. I don’t want to be here with him. She stuffed down the childish thoughts, sucking on her lower lip and shifting her weight from foot to foot. She couldn’t ask Lana to leave—it was a ridiculous notion. A man looked at her the wrong way, and she wanted to run away? When Lana hadn’t had a Christmas with her family for fifteen years? You’re selfish. He won’t bother you. He’s a man of God. Her nervous, sweaty hands wrung in front of her in spite of all her attempts to settle her misgivings.

Timothy and Roger caught up with them. “Where do you think Frieda and John ran off to? Brucie is looking for them. He’s mad they missed the rest of the performance. And that Terry decapitated baby Jesus.” Timothy stifled his laughter into a dry snort, and they all tittered again, not yet recovered from the spectacle Frieda’s family had created out of a simple Christmas pageant.

Helen crossed her arms. “If I had to take a guess, I would hope they made it to the bathroom before—well, before Cindy’s emergency happened preemptively.”

As if on cue, Frieda lumbered back into view, tugging Cindy by the arm, holding Rex on her hip, while John dragged a twin alongside in each arm, and Terry followed like a caboose. Bruce parted the crowd. “Terry!” he shrieked. “Terry! You busted Jesus! You broke his head off! All ‘cause Cindy ain’t got the sense to hold her pee!”

“It wasn’t pee,” Terry said in a loud, matter-of-fact voice. Frieda shushed her, but she paid little heed to the instruction. “You wouldn’t want to poop your pants on stage, would you? I had to take care of her. Jesus is the son of God, I think he can put his own head back on.”

Planting his hands on his hips, Bruce jutted out his chin at his sister. “God is going to be mad at you!”
“Is not!”

“Is so! Daddy, if somebody broke your baby’s head off, wouldn’t you be mad at them?”

John, only half-listening as he focused on detaching Stuart’s hand from Sue’s hair, shrugged and said, “Sure, Brucie, whatever you say.”

Bruce stuck his tongue out at her. “See, Daddy said so!”

Terry whirled on Mary Eunice with frenzied eyes. “Miss Sister!” Lana cast a sideways glance at her and smirked. Oh. That’s me. I’m Miss Sister. “Miss Sister! Is it true that God is going to be mad at me ’cause I accidentally broke Jesus’s head off when I dropped him? God knows it’s ’cause Cindy was gonna poop herself otherwise, right? ’Cause nobody wants to poop themselves on stage in front of a bunch of people, not even for Jesus.”

Mary Eunice squatted down in front of them. “I think you’re right. God knows. God doesn’t want any accidents to happen during the Christmas pageant. I’m sure someone will put baby Jesus back together for next year’s play.” Terry whirled around, prepared to huff her victory in Bruce’s face, but Mary Eunice held up a hand. “Now, wait a minute. We shouldn’t boast. Pride is a sin.” Mary Eunice’s chest filled with regret that she had to leave so soon. If Lana is right, there’s a lot Terry could learn from her. Perhaps Terry was going through a phase; maybe she would grow up like a normal girl and have a husband and children. But if those things weren’t written in her stars, if God intended a different path for her, she would walk a hard road, and a familiar face and guiding hand would benefit her. She’s still a child. Let the future unroll as it will. Each day has enough trouble of its own. “Don’t worry, sweetie. You’ll be alright.”

“Don’t worry, sweetie. You’ll be alright.”

Cynicism had not yet violated her childlike innocence; nothing kept her from loving, wholly and truly, a stranger she had known for less than a week. “I love you, too, sweetheart.”

Terry peeled herself off of Mary Eunice with a sheepish smile and a blush. Frieda gazed down at them with an arched eyebrow. “Terry! You don’t even like to hug me and your daddy. What on earth has gotten into you?”

The girl stuttered over her words. “It’s just, I think—’cause Miss Sister is really pretty…”

Covering her mouth with her hand, Mary Eunice averted her eyes, murmuring a quiet thanks for the unwarranted compliment. Lana had gained a grin so wide, Mary Eunice swore she could’ve fit quarters between her teeth. Frieda cocked out a hip to bounce the baby, who began to babble with dissatisfaction. “Well, don’t you think I’m really pretty?” Face reddening, Terry stammered over an answer, forming no coherent syllables until Frieda interrupted, “Darling, I’m teasing you. Go play with your friends. I think Linda is trying to fit Jesus’s head back on his neck so Mr. Ross can solder it.”
Terry glanced back, but Bruce had already run off, leaving her alone. “I can take Rex, Mama, and play with him. Linda won’t mind.”

“Oh—well, alright. Be careful, alright? Pick a place and sit down. He’s not a little baby anymore. He’s almost half your size.” True to her word, Frieda draped the baby in Terry’s small arms, the burden unbefitting any child of her young age, but she didn’t complain under the weight and instead staggered away, off to a quiet corner of the room, where she plopped down in the floor and let him sit in her lap. Lana gave her a skeptical look. “Oh, don’t look like that. She dropped him for the first time when he was twelve hours old. Every baby since Cindy has been manhandled by Terry. She’s going to be a great mother one day.”

“Dropping babies makes her a great mother?” Timothy asked, and Frieda swatted him in the arm. “Jeez, I was teasing.” He rubbed the sore place she left on his bicep. “C’mon, let me and Roger take the twins. We’ll fix ‘em a dessert. Y’all forget about being parents for a few minutes. God knows you deserve a break.” He picked up Stuart, and Roger picked up Sue, so they both headed off to the snack bar.

Frieda placed a hand on her forehead. “He’s right. This is the first moment I’ve been childless in—in as long as I can remember. Lord have mercy, this can’t be healthy. Eight kids. I’m not going to have a shred of sanity left by the time they’re adults. You’ll find me dancing naked around a firepit in the woods practicing voodoo to keep them all safe.”

Helen placed a placating hand on her forearm. “It gets easier,” she said. “Eventually, they leave.” She winked, teasing, and then she faced John. “You might be a gentleman and ask your lady to dance. How long has it been? Since your wedding night, I’d wager? The radio is playing all the best carols. We can call it a Christmas miracle.”

Waving her off, Frieda shook her head. “No, no, Mama, I can’t. I couldn’t dance when I was in high school. I sure can’t dance now when I’m a pregnant whale—John, would you not look so enticed? I’m not dancing. Probably not ever again. Those days are behind me, right alongside the days of a slim waist and spotless skin.”

Arching an eyebrow, John touched her hip. “C’mon, Frieda. Old man winkle over there is going at it with his wife in a wheelchair. Nobody’s gonna notice or care. We should do it.” He tugged on her by the waist, but she swatted his hands away, lips twisting downward in distaste. “Frieda…” He reached for her wrist. Lana squeezed between them in a subtle step, separating them, but her eyes flashed when he went to grab his wife again, and he ceased. “We could have some fun.”

“The last time you said that, I got pregnant again.” John’s face flushed. “Why don’t you dance with Lana?” The blush froze right where it had started to crawl over him; Lana stiffened, back straight as a pole, lips twisted into a downward purse. “You want to dance, and Lana’s always been the better dancer of the two of us—Lana, please? Be my big sister, dance with my husband while your pregnant whale sister sits this one out.”

Face blanching, John stammered a few syllables, but as his anxiety revealed itself, Lana’s apprehension faded. “Of course.” What? Mary Eunice stole a sideways glance at her, confused by her sudden agreement, but Lana winked at her, a teasing thing. She knows what she’s doing. “I can oblige.” She offered a hand to him. John hesitated. He’s afraid of her. She’s doing it on purpose. “C’mon, John. You just said you wanted to have some fun. It’s Christmas. There’s no party like swing dancing to ‘The First Noel’ in church.” She’s trapped him. She’s doing it for fun! Mary Eunice had never thought Lana so petty—but as John reluctantly took her hand, leading her into the center of the party with a sluggish step, a tiny grin crawled onto her lips in spite of her attempts to stifle it. Serves him right.
Frieda rocked back on the heels of her feet with a long sigh. “Daddy would’ve loved to watch Christmas fall apart, you know.” She looked to her mother. “Better than Jesus’s eyes falling out, like they did last year. Remember?”

“I remember, darling. I’m not senile yet.” Helen crossed her arms. “Though it might be coming. Especially if you keep having kids.”

“Not going to.”

“Let’s not argue on Christmas.”

Frieda blew a long sigh out of her nose. “Let’s not argue ever, and you let me make decisions for my family.”

“Fair enough.”

I don’t belong here. The personal family conversation made Mary Eunice feel like an intruder. She didn’t belong to them. She hadn’t suffered their loss; she had merely accompanied Lana here to stave off the loneliness. Eavesdropping burned inside of her, a sin, though she couldn’t think of the commandment condemning it. I’ll give them some space. “Excuse me, I’m sorry, which way is the restroom?”

Helen blinked in surprise at her interruption. “It’s just down the hall over there.” She nodded in the general direction. “With some storage closets. Big sign, you can’t miss it.”

“Thank you.” Smoothing her hand over the sleeve of her sweater, the notches of her scabs stood out against her touch. I’ve got to stop picking. The chaos of the holiday season had sent her backward, picking on the tiny wounds whenever her anxiety flared up. Lana wouldn’t be happy to see the mess she had made of her arm. The excursion into the woods when she saved Terry left her a slew of new scratches to aggravate and infect. I’m a walking nervous tic.

Pushing the door to the women’s restroom, Mary Eunice hesitated in front of the mirror, adjusting her veil. Merry Christmas, Mary. She had deep bags under her eyes from the many nights of interrupted sleep; last night had not remedied the long-standing debt she had accrued, though she had finally had the opportunity to sleep in Lana’s arms once again. “I love her so much,” she said aloud. The words surprised her. She blinked at herself in the mirror, taken aback by hearing her own voice say the words. Her heart quivered. “I love Lana.” The bathroom was empty; no one else could hear her. Speaking aloud to herself eased the tension inside of her chest. “I love Lana so much.”

The door swung open again, and Mary Eunice smoothed her veil down once more. “Excuse me, I’m—” She turned and bumped into a man’s chest. “Sir?” Her voice emerged in a squeak. She jerked her head up to lock eyes with Pastor Johnson. “Excuse me, I—” This is the women’s restroom! Mary Eunice took a step back, but he advanced on her. “Pastor, please, I’ve got to—”

She didn’t finish her sentence, lunging for the door. He seized her by the wrist and dragged her back like a parent exerting his wrath over his angry child. “Shut up!” Her back cracked where he slammed it on the counter. “I warned you! I warned you not to come back!” Hands flurrying, she swatted at him where his hands jostled at the buckle of her skirt. All of her strength had left her, instead producing thin mewls of protest, a weak cat living inside her throat and fighting him with sheathed claws. “It’s time you learned a lesson.”

One big hand caught her wrists and pinned them in front of her. “Stop it—Stop it, please, stop—” She hiccupped—tears had begun to fall from her eyes without her consent or knowledge. “Please—” He backhanded her. All of the bones in her body shriveled and shrank. Sliding away along
the counter, she pedaled away, but he jerked her skirt down so hard that it ripped and jammed his knee between her legs. She clapped them together just a moment too slow. The cap of his knee ground against her panties.

*God help me. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee—* “Your kind thinks they can come here, to *my* country, in *my* church, and be safe? You’re kidding yourself.” He released her wrists, instead placing his hands on the soft parts of her inner thighs and digging his fingers in. The pinching burned, and then it ached, and the skin between his fingers between to discolor. She whimpered. “Stupid bitch.” He pried her legs apart.

“Why didn’t you scream?” Lana had asked her that question weeks ago, after she’d encountered Rachel in the kitchen on that fateful night. “I didn’t, either. Scream. I just lay there, underneath him, hoping that if I was really small—and really quiet—maybe he would let me live.” Mary Eunice’s heart skipped a beat in her chest. “I should scream. I should scream. Her belly flipped. Her voice had vanished into the quivering of her lips when he slapped her; she had not even a plea for own life left inside of her.

The zipper to his pants buzzed. Mary Eunice’s eyes darted down. Her breath strangled in her throat at the sight of his penis—erect and purple, the head of it glistening with some bodily fluid, all of the skin pulled back where he grasped it by the hilt. The nausea overwhelmed her. Pitching forward, she gagged. Vomit and bile spewed from her, splattering all over him, his crisp shirt, his exposed penis, his shoes, and though it ran down her chin and burned inside of her nose, she took the opportunity his shock provided to lunge for the door, this time unhindered.

Ripping the door open, she staggered out into the hallway, skirt pooling around her ankles. “Help!” He grabbed her by the hair, but she wriggled free, leaving him grasping her veil and coif. “Help!” Her feet tangled up in her torn skirt. Sprawling out on the floor, the pastor pounced on her from behind. He grabbed a fistful of her braid.

*Scream! Scream!* She tossed her head back and did just that—a bloodcurdling shriek, more than she ever thought she could produce, ripped from inside of her.

The seconds ticked by. She paused only to suck in a deep breath. When he stuffed his fingers inside of her mouth, she bit him and screamed again. “Get off of that girl! What the hell do you think you’re doing?” The minister choked. His heavy weight vanished from on top of her. Mary Eunice rolled over, pedaling backward, away from him, on all fours. She lost her skirt and one of her shoes, nearly naked on the floor, streaked in her own vomit, sweat, and tears. Helen wrestled with Pastor Johnson, a man twice her size, with her purse strap caught around his neck, drawing taut whenever he swung at her.

“Mama!” Frieda’s flat-footed jog and cry distracted Helen. The man grabbed her by the hair and slammed her head against the wall. “Mama!” Helen crumpled like a ragdoll, falling to the floor in a heap. “What do you think you’re doing?” He whirled around to flee; he had given up on his mission, and instead, he turned tail like a coward. “Get back here!” *No, Frieda, leave it alone.* Mary Eunice’s tongue flapped inside of her mouth. Helen stirred from the ground, lifting a feeble arm. Frieda charged after the offender. She caught him by the belt loops of his pants, which he hadn’t buckled back up since she had fled the bathroom. He stumbled. Frieda jumped just high enough to loop her arms around his throat and fasten them there, and he bowed over under her weight, tripping over his feet and sending them both spilling onto the floor. “Help! Somebody, for fuck’s sake! Help!”

The man rolled her over, but Frieda stuck her fingers in his eyes and ears, yanking on his ear lobes and his nose, until Roger grabbed him and slammed him against the wall. “What the *fuck* do you think you’re doing to my sister?”

Frieda scrambled back in a crabwalk until she struck a wall. With a grimace, one hand fluttered in
the air before landing on her engorged belly. “Not—Not me, he was after Mary Eunice—me and Mama just saw him, heard her screaming—” Roger fumbled in his back pocket for some handcuffs. “Do you carry those everywhere?”

“No. I grabbed the wrong coat tonight.” He fastened them on the pastor’s wrists. “And I’m glad I did. Sick fuck.” A crowd began to form around them, a few people at first, then a few more. Mary Eunice pinched her leg together. Dark red bruises began to form where he had grabbed her by the thighs, visible to anyone standing over her; the thin hair on her legs glistened in the light. Shivering from the exposure, she bowed her head, fat tears sliding down her cheeks. Her stomach wanted to relieve itself again, but she gulped. She couldn’t face the embarrassment of vomiting in front of all these people on top of everything else. “Timothy! Timothy, call the station! I want this fucker arrested.” I don’t want to talk to the police. Her chin wobbled.

“What the hell is going on here? Frieda?” John shouldered his way through the crowd. Lana. Lana was with John. And like an angel, soft arms wreathed around her. Lana didn’t speak, but a coat with a familiar scent—Lana’s perfume—wrapped around her waist and protected her from everyone’s prying eyes. Mary Eunice fumbled for her, afraid to open her eyes, and hugged her tight and close. “Mrs. Winters?”

A cool hand swept her hair out of her eyes where it had fallen from its braid. “John—” Frieda’s voice was thick. “I think we need to go to the hospital. Mama was knocked out, and I—I don’t feel so good—”

“The kids—”

Timothy cut in. “Don’t worry about the kids. We’ll take them to our place. Go to the hospital. We’ll send someone to take your statements.”

Cool lips pressed to Mary Eunice’s forehead. “Are you hurt?” Lana whispered, so low she could barely make it out. “Did he hurt you?” Yes, he hurt me, my insides hurt, my stomach hurts, my head hurts, I want my veil, I want to hide. Mary Eunice shook her head. “Are you sure?” She nodded. “Do you want to go to the hospital?” She shook her head. No, I want to go home. I need to shower. I need to brush my teeth. “Okay.” Another soft hand smoothed her hair back, keeping the strands from falling where they weren’t welcome. “I’m going to grab your skirt and your shoe. Do you know where you lost your veil?”

She wanted to croak a response, but her voice had vanished. She hiccuped, shaking her head. Her swollen eyes dared to peek open, where Roger had the handcuffed man pinned against the wall. The veil was beneath their feet. Across from her, Frieda and John propped Helen, groggy but conscious, up between them, Freida’s hand unmoving from her round stomach.

Lana approached her brother. “Lana, what are you—”

“I just need her veil. He ripped it off of her.” Lana’s voice was brittle and detached, but she quivered where she stood; tremors punctuated the movement of her hands. “Please let me have her veil.”

Roger bent down and gave it to her. “She needs to stay. We’re going to need her statement.”

“We’re not staying here. She’s going home.” Lana’s hands shook too hard for her to secure the veil over Mary Eunice’s head. After a few failed attempts, she let it fall into her lap, choosing to work with her skirt, instead. “Slide your legs into this for me. Good.” She popped on her shoe. “You keep my coat, sunshine.” Lana draped it over her shoulders. “You’re going to be fine. Come with me. Stand up—good.” Lana’s voice choked with brittle tears just at the surface, not yet shed. She’s so strong. Mary Eunice stared hard at the ground. “Let’s go home. Let’s go see Gus.”
Mary Eunice had no complaint against it. She gathered herself and rested her body against Lana’s, marching through the crowd back toward home.
Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

Chapter Notes

1 John 4:18

“It’s okay, sunshine.” Nestled in the crooks of Lana’s body, Mary Eunice kept her eyes pinched closed, fighting to shut out the world—fighting to shut out anything but the soft lull of Lana’s voice, repeating those words over and over, her voice quiet under the rumble of the car, which rocked with bumps in the road. “It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.” Lana shivered against Mary Eunice, but she had sacrificed her coat to wrap it around her girlfriend. It’s not so cold. But all of her insides quivered from a chill sourced from deep within her stomach. Her stomach kept flipping. She swallowed the thick bile in her throat. “Mary Eunice? Can you hear me? We’re almost home. We’re almost there.” A cool hand combed over her braided hair. Mary Eunice nuzzled into her hand. Snot poured into and from her nose, inhibiting her ability to smell Lana’s perfume, but her soft skin soothed some of the kinks in Mary Eunice’s gut.

The car chugged to a stop. Lifting her head, she peeked up at the front porch of the old farmhouse. The porchlight glowed, moths dancing around it. Home. Inside. She had escaped the crowd, and now it was just the two of them. But at what price? Frieda and Helen had gotten hurt trying to help her. Mrs. Winters hit her head really hard—and Frieda’s pregnant… Her breath hitched. She choked on a lump of tears in her throat. Lana rubbed her back. “I’m so sorry. God, I’m so sorry.” It’s not your fault. Mary Eunice feared the sound of her own voice. She didn’t know how to speak and comfort Lana. “Come here. Let’s go inside. You can lean on me, alright? Stay close to me. We’ll go inside, and you can brush your teeth and take a shower—whatever you want.” Lana’s words echoed, and half of their meaning was lost on Mary Eunice. In her mind’s eye, the pastor’s cold eyes glinted down at her with more hate than she had ever imagined before in her life.

Something brushed the inside of her thigh. Hiccuping, she braced herself, hands fashioned into claws, a scream threatening to tear from her, breath catching inside of her and refusing to emerge. “Hey, hey—easy, it’s just me.” Lana had taken her veil out of her lap. “I didn’t mean to scare you.” That same gentle hand touched her cheek, brushed away the tears rolling down her face. “Come inside. Please. Don’t be afraid. There’s no one to hurt you here.”

I know. Numb, Mary Eunice nodded in agreement, struggling to focus her eyes on the planes of Lana’s face. They darted everywhere, seeing shadows shift and leap and glow with reddened eyes. She spun her arm through Lana’s and clutched her tight. Don’t let me go. If she kept Lana nearby, the nightmares would stay in the shadows. “Good.” Lana helped her out of the car and slammed the door shut. Inside the house, Gus’s barks echoed, welcoming them home. Lana pushed the door open—Helen hadn’t locked it when they left—and brushed past Gus, who bumped his head against their thighs. He whined, tail tucked, and trotted after them down the hall to the room they had shared the night before. “Here, sit down—sit down.” Lana tugged the blankets back and pushed Mary Eunice onto the mattress. Her hands shook in the air. “Let me find your rosary.” My chest hurts. She pinched her legs together again, crossing her arms over her chest.

A pill bottle shook in Lana’s hand as she poured out her Valium and took one, and then she gave another to Mary Eunice, rosary in her other hand. “Take this.” That’s yours. Mary Eunice shook her head. “You need to take it. It’ll calm you.” She shuddered. With a pale hand, she pinched the
pill between her thumb and forefinger and placed it on her dry tongue. “Here. You can take your rosary.” She wrapped the beads around her hand. *I don’t know how to pray about this.* What could she say to God about a man who had veiled his bigotry and violence in religion? The church had always protected her. The church was her safety. She had always run to God to escape the violence and vitriol of the world around her. *He thought he could rape me without committing a sin. He thought he could rape me and have the moral high ground.* “Tell me what to do.”

The quiet words surprised her. She lifted her gaze to Lana’s face. The light flashed on the streaks left behind by tears. *Don’t cry, Lana, don’t cry.* Mary Eunice crawled into Lana’s lap and wrapped her arms around her neck, feeling quite childish. With wet lips, she kissed away one of Lana’s tears, which made her girlfriend bring forth a throaty, incredulous chuckle. Lana reclined on the pillows and shifted, wrapping them both up in the blankets, arms and legs entangled. “I love you so much,” she whispered. “So much. And I’m so sorry I left you alone. I never thought, I thought he was harmless, I didn’t think—” She cut herself off, swallowing a sob, and Mary Eunice squeezed her tighter around the middle, resting her head on Lana’s chest. “I’m sorry.”

*Say something. You have to say something.* Mary Eunice’s tongue laid in the bottom of her mouth like a limp, rotting piece of flesh. Eyes not moving from Lana’s face, she made a thin keening sound in the back of her throat. Lana spun her hair out of its braid and let it cascade around her face in the natural waves from being tied up so long. “It’s okay. You don’t have to say anything.” Tears kept falling from Lana’s eyes, and she dashed them away with the back of her hand before she threaded her fingers through Mary Eunice’s hair again. “—I understand. As long as you’re not hurt, that’s—that’s all that matters.” *Lana, don’t cry.* Mary Eunice’s heart broke at the sight. “Do you want to try to sleep?” Eyes widening, she shook her head. I don’t think I’ll ever sleep again. She would see him behind her eyes. All of the shadows already crawled—if she gave them the opportunity, they would lunge at her and swallow her whole. “Okay, okay, that’s okay.”

Lana fell silent. Mary Eunice missed the sound of her voice. She nudged her once, hoping to prompt her to say more. *I don’t want the silence.* The indulgence of it made her loathe herself, but she feared the places her mind would wander if she didn’t have the grounding sound of Lana’s quiet voice at her ear. “I love you,” Lana said. Mary Eunice squeezed her once. “You don’t have to tell me anything. I’m just glad you’re safe.” She exhaled a long sigh and shifted a little. On top of Lana, her girlfriend’s heartbeat pumped into her ear, all of the blood rushing there where she could hear it. Her heavy breaths fanned across Mary Eunice’s face and rasped in her chest. Closing her eyes, Mary Eunice relished in the sweet sounds of Lana’s life beating against her cheek. *There is no silence when she holds me.* “We can stay right here as long as you want.” A sweaty hand caressed her cheek to wipe away tears, escaping where she had given them no permission to leave. A heavy lump formed in her throat, and she swallowed hard around it. Her throat and chest ached, and her belly wanted to relieve itself again, bile rising up for her to gulp it back down. “I’m so sorry. I should never have brought you there. He told us he was dangerous outright. It was stupid to ignore him.” *I have to say something. She’s blaming herself. I’ve got to say something.* But her dry lips had stuck themselves together and refused to separate. Her tongue wedged to the roof of her mouth like super glue had adhered it there. A shiver passed through her. Lana’s hands swept over her shoulders and rubbed them. *I’m still wearing her coat.* Even the warm interior of the house couldn’t bring the flame of life back into her soul.

Gus lay at the foot of the bed, whining, but neither of them invited him to join them; he was banished from the furniture, and Mary Eunice didn’t want to worsen their horrible night by getting Gus kicked out again. Still, she dangled one arm off of the side of the bed for him to lick her hand. He thrust his large skull underneath her hand for her to distribute pats all over him, scratching behind his floppy ears and nuzzling his wet nose. Gus mouthed at her hand, and then he stood up on his hind legs, front paws on the side of the bed, to strain across the mattress, tongue flapping at her face. “Oh, Gus!” Lana’s hand formed an open palm, ready to push him away, but at the first caress of his wet tongue, Mary Eunice’s lips formed an inadvertent smile. His whiskers grazed her
cheek, erecting goosebumps all over from the tickling sensation. “Oh, Gus,” Lana repeated in a whisper.

The fat part of his tongue swathed into Mary Eunice’s nose and thrust between her lips. She wriggled with giggles. On reflex, she nuzzled deeper into Lana’s chest, trying to escape the whiskers which crawled all over her face like the legs of a spider. A hiccup rose from her, followed by a dry cough, followed by a gentle laugh. Her hand swatted at Gus’s head, fumbling against his insistence. Burying her face deep in Lana’s chest, she pressed her nose between her soft breasts, using the fatty mounds to hide from Gus’s expression of love. But as she realized the sensation of Lana’s breasts firm against her cheeks, her face warmed. This is nice. Her giggle died off. “Mmm…” Then, she lifted her eyes to Lana, vision watery as she made out the red-rimmed eyes and quivering lips of her partner. Her mouth wiggled. Gus had freed her from her shocked silence. “Lana,” she whispered.

A small, sad smile flexed onto Lana’s shaking lips. She tucked a wavy blonde lock behind her ear. “Hey, sunshine.” All the safety Mary Eunice knew was between Lana’s two arms, yet Lana shivered from the same fear which had paralyzed Mary Eunice’s voice. She is so strong. She is everything. But she is so small. “How do you feel?”

Her brain gathered up its memories and hurled them at her—the pastor’s voice, the glint in his eyes, his hands pinching into the soft flesh of her thighs and prying them apart, the purple flash of his glistening penis under the bright lights of the bathroom. She gulped to keep from gagging at the thought. She shook her head, unable to fathom a good answer. Not good. Her skin burned like with fever. “Dirty.” Her voice barely registered on the still air.

Lana cupped her cheek with her damp palm and caressed her lips with her thumb. “Do you want to shower?” A certain intimacy locked between their eyes. In Lana’s eyes, she found understanding gentler than she could’ve ever fathomed—true empathy, soft and weepy. Guilt pricked inside of her. How many of her demons did I awaken for her? How many nightmares will she have because of this? She bit the tip of her tongue. Lana wouldn’t let her blame herself, so she restrained herself from speaking on the matter. Instead, she bobbed her head. A hot shower, hot enough to scald all of the sensations the man had left behind from her body, was a luxury she would not typically afford herself, but right now, she craved it like a desert wanderer craved an oasis.

“Alright. Do you want me to come with you?”

The second question took Mary Eunice aback. Thick saliva pooled in the bottom of her mouth. Her first instinct told her, Yes, yes, please, I don’t see the shadows as long as you’re with me, come with me! but she stifled those pleading words, sucking on her top teeth as she thought on Lana’s offering. Her body ached from where a man had touched it. She needed to burn him off of her. She couldn’t let Lana see her naked—it would have given her pause, anyway, but now, she could hardly consider the notion. And it would be dumb for her to stand outside the shower watching the shower curtain, anyway. She shook her head. “I’ll be fine.” Each word grazed her raw vocal cords and made her grimace.

“Okay. I’ll stay right here. I might take Gus outside. Okay?” Mary Eunice hummed an agreement. Lana sat up and pressed a tender kiss to her forehead. “I love you.”

The utter warmth of her love spread all through Mary Eunice’s extremities. “I love you, too, Lana.” She leaned into Lana’s hand on her cheek a final time, steeling herself for their separation, however temporary. Then, she tugged herself away from her girlfriend and staggered off to the bathroom, whole body airy, immaterial to her, floating with an abnormal lightness to her step. In the bathroom mirror, her haggard reflection stared back at her, face covered with red and pale splotches. Clear snot strung out from her nostrils. She smeared it away with the back of her hand.
and wiped it on her torn skirt. Turning her back to the mirror, she refused to look at herself as she undressed, creating a heap of her dirty clothing in the floor.

But she couldn’t escape her own naked body. The thick reddish cream curls between her legs sprang up when she removed her panties; the light-colored hair on her thighs could not obscure the hand-shaped bruises from view. Was this the body she wanted Lana to touch? The same skin which craved the caress of her girlfriend’s fingers and lips? Inadequacy pooled in the pit of her belly. A shy hand gathered in her pubic hair atop her mound and curled her fingers there, threading them through the kinky, coarse hair. Does Lana have hers? For the times she had exposed herself to Lana in moments of illness and weakness, she had never seen Lana naked. When granted the opportunity, she averted her eyes, afraid of her own lust. Is it perverse to wonder? Perhaps. She pushed the thoughts from her mind and stepped into the shower.

An underground well pumped the water up to the farmhouse, so the scent of rotting eggs fumed over her—tainted by sulfur, the water carried the stench, but it didn’t faze her. She twisted the knob for the hot water all the way on as steam lifted into the air like smoke. Her skin burned. She bit her tongue to shove away all thoughts of how the scalding water hurt her. Instead, she slurped in a deep breath, smothered by the water vapor in the air. The shower head beat into her back when she turned to wash her hair; the heat ripped the soap suds off of her skin and left it swollen and irritated after she washed her body. Whenever the pastor rose up behind her eyes, she dragged her fingernails across the scabs on her left arm, and the open wounds burned under the hot water. The heat relaxed the dull throbbing pain in the bruises on her thighs. Her sinuses opened so she could breathe more clearly.

By the time the hot water had run cold, her burned skin had gone numb to the heat, swollen and tender under her slightest touch. The frigid rivulets streamed over her, eliciting goosebumps, and her small pink nipples rolled into tight pebbles, the areolas pinched and bumpy at the edges from the chill. Mary Eunice wrapped herself in one of the ratty, stained towels from the basket—she supposed Mrs. Winters hadn’t replaced her bath supplies for over a decade—and used it to sponge up the cold water from her shivering body. “Where’s the…” She swept the steam-filled room, but she hadn’t brought any clean clothes with her to the bathroom. Oh, dear. Swallowing hard, she tugged at the towel, trying futilely to elongate it and cover the reddish purple bruises on her thighs. The hot water had stained her skin a hot red, but it couldn’t obscure the hand-shaped prints left behind.

She nudged the bedroom door open. Lana reclined on the bed, reading glasses on, her nose tucked into a book—into Mary Eunice’s Bible, reading one of the bookmarked passages. A thin nightgown was draped over the foot of the bed, sheer and silky and pink. “It’s Frieda’s.” Her eyes darted back up to Lana, who peered at her over the top rim of her glasses. The look made Mary Eunice’s mouth dry up, heart fluttering, mind short circuiting with repeated hoots of, She’s so pretty, she looks so good, oh my word why am I naked, my skin burns, and her chest ached until she remembered to breathe, inhaling deeply like a drowning victim breaching the surface of the water. “All of ours are dirty.” Hovering in the air like a hummingbird uncertain of its purpose, Mary Eunice lingered at the foot of the bed, pinching at the top hem of the towel. Lana closed the Bible and placed it on the end table, swinging out of bed, and she picked up the sheer nightgown. Her feet sank, silent as a cat’s, into the carpet. She lifted the sheer fabric above Mary Eunice’s head and tugged it down. Numb, Mary Eunice fumbled to find the arm holes, eyes closed, lips quivering. “You burned yourself with the hot water.” Lana guided her hands through the short sleeves. Her fingertips grazed the scarred areas of Mary Eunice’s left arm, but she didn’t remark on the scratches. Gentle as a mother
cat nudging a kitten, Lana tugged the ratty towel so it fell away from Mary Eunice’s body. “Here. Put on some panties. Then I’ll brush your hair.”

Stiff, Mary Eunice bent at the waist to step into the underwear, clumsy feet fumbling to go into the leg holes. Lana held her up by the shoulders, hands placed there but not gripping, not possessive —only supportive. Lana handled her like a frail piece of china or crystal. “Thank you,” Mary Eunice whispered after she hiked up the clean cotton underwear.

As she straightened, her back ached. Lana tucked a stray, sodden lock of hair behind her ear. Single droplets of cold water dribbled from the ends of her hair. “Sit on the bed,” Lana said, but her tone had nothing imperative to it, and she sank onto the soft mattress with a relived sigh floating from her nose. Lana crawled to sit behind her. “I’m not good at this like you are. Bear with me.” Lana smoothed a hand over her wet hair before she ran the brush through it. A few tangles hiccuped at the thick bristles, but she collected the wet locks in her hand to keep them from pulling too much. “Do you want to tell me what happened?” Mary Eunice hugged herself around the middle. “You don’t have to,” she amended quickly, “if you don’t want to. I—I really understand.”

“No, I…” Mary Eunice’s throat closed up tight. She gulped around the scratchy texture inside her mouth, all rough from where she had screamed for help. Squeezing her arms tight around her chest, she licked the roof of her mouth. “He followed me to the bathroom. He—I think he was waiting outside—he knew there wasn’t anyone else in there. He grabbed me—” She hiccuped and shuddered. Lana eased closer behind her, pressing a tender kiss right behind her ear. “He hit me so I’d stop fighting him. I don’t—I don’t know why I stopped—” Clumsy thumbs fumbled to wipe the ears from her cheeks as they fell. “He p-put his knee between my legs, and then he ripped my skirt off.”

Those soft lips moved from the cusp of her ear to the expanse of her neck. They weren’t sensual, didn’t leave the red marks behind, but they brought her comfort; Lana kept her hair pulled to the side like a curtain and wrapped her arms around her, a security blanket weighing her down. “I remembered—I remembered what you said, with Rachel, when you asked me why I didn’t scream, but I—I couldn’t, I couldn’t breathe, he smelled so bad.” She gulped around the lump in her throat which threatened to choke her or gag her. “Until he unzipped his pants, and—” She had never said the word penis before in her life, and it stuck under her tongue like all of the curse words she had never learned to say.

Her voice dropped to a low whisper. “He took out his thing.” Her hands trembled. She loathed herself for the childish choice of words, but she didn’t amend them. “And I looked at it, and then I—I threw up. On him. Everywhere. And he let me go, because—I guess he was surprised—I ran, and then I screamed. And that was when your mother and Frieda—they saw, and they got him off of me—” She hiccuped. And now they’re hurt and they might not be okay and Frieda’s pregnant and Mrs. Winters is old and they shouldn’t have had to wrestle a grown man. I should never have left them. None of her words came with ease, so she stopped rambling. “I’m sorry.”

Lana pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. “Don’t be sorry.”

“But—they got hurt—and I threw up on him—”

“Mama and Frieda are farm wives. They can kick ass harder than a wrestler. And he deserved every drop of vomit you put on him.” Mary Eunice placed her hands over Lana’s where they interlocked in front of her body. She threaded their fingers together. “Nothing that happened is your fault. I promise you that. You did nothing wrong.” Lana’s chest pressed flush against Mary Eunice’s back, and she nuzzled against her cheek. I want to kiss her. Mary Eunice turned her head just enough to meet Lana’s lips in a chaste brush. Lana smiled, and this time, she didn’t carry all of the darkness in her eyes but rather looked genuine. She slid from around Mary Eunice’s body and
kissed her again. “Do you understand?”

Mary Eunice glanced sideways at her, and then she lay back, catching herself on the plush pillows beneath her. “I shouldn’t have left them at all. That was stupid.” Lana lay on her side, head propped up on her hand. Mary Eunice stared up at the ceiling. “If I had stayed with them, he wouldn’t have found me. I shouldn’t have been by myself—” Lana shushed her, placing an index finger over her lips. Mary Eunice’s mouth buffered a few times before she fell into the obedient silence, lips puckered to kiss the pad of Lana’s finger.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. He wanted to hurt you. He’s probably hurt women before you, and he will keep hurting women if he isn’t stopped. You can’t blame yourself for what he wanted to do to you. That had nothing to do with you.” Lana traced Mary Eunice’s cheekbone with the pad of her forefinger, mapping the planes of her face with that single digit like an artist referencing a still life. “It’s not your fault. Will you say that for me?”

A gentle nudge on her side prompted Mary Eunice. In a bare whisper, she said, “It’s not my fault.” Lana kissed her on the corner of her lips in a small reward, so she said again, “It’s not my fault,” and Lana kissed her full on the mouth. Her face warmed with blush. All of her itchy, irritated skin, burned from the shower, craved the sensation of Lana’s hands. “Lana?” Lana hummed in response. “I like that. I love you.”

Lana’s wet mouth attached to Mary Eunice’s jawbone and suckled, gentle as the rain, sliding down the pale expanse of her neck. Mary Eunice giggled, a giddy sound. Lana didn’t climb atop her, but stayed perched at her side, keeping from pinning her down. Her heart skipped a beat, but instead of fear, an anxious form of joy flushed through her. One of Lana’s hands pressed the palm right atop her left breast, measuring the pulse through her chest. She detached her mouth from Mary Eunice’s collar bone and exhaled, fanning a sweet breath against her face. “Are you okay?” Yes, yes, I’m fine—don’t stop. Mary Eunice nodded. Enthusiasm and adrenaline pumped through her veins. “You’re trembling.”

Gathering up her silky nightgown in one hand, Mary Eunice tugged it up—the best response she could muster. She tugged it up, higher and higher, past her knees, past the bruises shaped like fingers on her thighs, past the curls peeking out of the hem of her panties, past the squish of her belly and her navel. She guided the fabric up her body until she folded it over each breast with a quiet, trembling sigh. “Lana,” she whispered. “I want you to touch all the places he touched me.”

Lana studied her girlfriend, pale beneath her, a snowy landscape upon which she could leave her own tracks. She kissed Mary Eunice once on the lips, a silent agreement. I know. I know what it’s like to wonder if you’ll ever get the feeling of his hands off of your body. She grazed her nose along the itchy fabric that Mary Eunice had pulled all the way up under her throat. Then, the tip of her nose met the soft skin between her breasts. Lana buried her face between them. The sensation, a woman’s tender breasts on her face, lit a fire in the pit of her stomach. Lips puckered, she pecked her way across the flushed skin, around in a lopsided circle until she reached the spreading pink of Mary Eunice’s areolas. Her girlfriend hitched a breath beneath her when she left the first wet streak on her nipple. Delicate as a bee landing on rose, she pressed a kiss right to its bud, and then she slipped it into her mouth, both round eyes on Mary Eunice’s face, ready to sever if she so much as breathed out of rhythm.

Mary Eunice’s mouth twisted into a soft O. A quiet moan floated from her, chest rumbling with it. Lana nursed on her breast with gentler suction than she’d ever used before. Her mouth slipped from the nipple and grazed her teeth on the sensitive underside of her breast. “Lana,” Mary Eunice breathed, and she paused, gazing up at her lover for instruction. “Don’t stop. Please, don’t stop.” She bit her lower lip, hands clawing in the sheets. With a bit more gusto, Lana suckled on her other breast, kissing all of the exposed skin until she had left faint reddening marks in her wake.
“Mmm…” Mary Eunice arched her back into Lana’s mouth, thrusting her modest chest upward. Lana slid her hand up to fondle the breast she had left behind, flicking the nipple under her thumb and index finger.

As she moved down Mary Eunice’s squishy abdomen, planting kisses and suckling whenever she squirmed from ticklishness, she kept teasing her nipples with her fingers, massaging her soft breasts. Her hands didn’t leave Mary Eunice’s chest until her lips rested below her belly button, from which a long tuft of hair trailed down into the hem of her panties. You can’t do that. The delicious smell of woman rose up from under the fresh underwear. Lana’s mouth pooled with saliva at the salty, acidic odor. She trailed her nose along the top hem of her underwear, letting the protruding pubic hair graze her chin.

You can’t do that.
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At the brow of Mary Eunice’s thigh, Lana dipped down, crossing the band of fabric to kiss down her inner thigh toward the bruises shaped like a man’s hands. The fingers had left their image behind, thicker and larger than Lana’s own delicate hands. Mary Eunice didn’t spread her legs for Lana, and Lana made no attempt to separate them. Mouth slightly open, she sucked on the center of the forming bruise, and then she nipped there. Mary Eunice shivered and hummed a pleasant noise. This is mine. Tears burned in Lana’s eyes. She blinked hard to hold them back, turning her head to kiss the identical bruise on the other thigh. Don’t think of him. Think of me. Remember that I love you. She exhaled through her nose and sucked in another deep breath. The scent of arousal assaulted her. Oh, god, I didn’t mean to do that. Lana pinched her own legs tight together to sate the pressure growing in her vulva. A small wet stain darkened the crotch of Mary Eunice’s panties.

“Lana?” This summoning was different from the moans Mary Eunice had created up until now. “Lana, I—I feel funny.” Lana slid back up beside her. She took the hem of Mary Eunice’s nightgown and tugged it back down to cover all of her exposed body, covering her breasts, her panties, her bruised thighs where the man had grabbed her. Mary Eunice peered up at her, face dark with a shamed blush. “I feel…” She curled her toes into the blankets. “My stomach is all funny.”

“Your stomach?” Lana asked. She folded the pillows up beside Mary Eunice and reclined there. I smelled a lot more than a stomachache. She grinned, resisting the urge to tease her lover. Mary Eunice had never experienced anything like this before in her life; she didn’t deserve any mockery for it.

“And…” Mary Eunice covered one eye with her hand, the other darting to Lana with shame. “Lower. It’s sort of—tingling.” Her eyes gleamed in the low light of the bedroom. “It’s because I want to make love to you, isn’t it? That’s where it is.”

Wrapping her cool hand around Mary Eunice’s, Lana tugged her palm away from her eye. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of.” She squeezed her hand tight, rolling her thumb over the back of it. The swollen burns splotched all over her body made Lana wince, but she didn’t remark on them except to brush her fingers over them where she could manage. “I feel it, too.” At the words, she pinched her legs tighter together, knees bumping into one another, and she bit her lower lip to keep from making a sound at the slight relief she gained from the movement.

Mary Eunice threaded their fingers together and nuzzled into Lana’s hair, inhaling. The sound of her deep breath sent the hair on the back of Lana’s neck standing up. God, I love you so much. The urge to wrap her girlfriend in another tight hug and smother her in kisses and bind them together in the blankets rose within her, an unbiddable urge to protect Mary Eunice where she had failed earlier. “You feel it for me?” I could’ve lost her. If he had wanted to kill her, he could’ve done it. Her bones stiffened like planks. Goosebumps erupted down her arms. She clutched Mary Eunice’s hand tighter. “Lana? Are you alright?”
She blinked at the address, resisting the urge to shake herself from the traumatizing but illogical fears. “I’m fine.” Her throat had a slight croak to it, a hoarseness which broke the credibility of her words. Mary Eunice’s brows quirked together skeptically, but she didn’t say anything to challenge her. “Yes, I—I feel it for you.” I won’t lose her. No one can take her away from me. I’ll be careful. I’ll keep her safe. She tucked a lock of hair behind Mary Eunice’s ear. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Mary Eunice rolled onto her stomach and rested her cheek on the pillow. “I’m tired.”

Lana smoothed a hand over her hair before she hooked her arm around Mary Eunice’s waist. “Get some sleep, Mary Eunice. We can head home tomorrow.” Her lover hummed a soft note in reply. Lana pressed her nose into the blonde locks and rested there, lingering above there, until her back rose and fell with even breaths. She strung her hand through the long hair, ambivalence curling inside of her. Is it right to love her so soon? Her heart had yearned for Mary Eunice for months now. Nothing brought her more joy than lying in the arms of the woman she loved, kissing her, inhaling her sweetness. Would Wendy hate her for finding a replacement so soon? She isn’t a replacement. I love them differently. Apples and oranges. She had thought the same on the night of Halloween, when she thought she could never love Mary Eunice freely. I’ll never stop missing Wendy. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t have another love.

Her father had told her to let Mary Eunice love her. She was blind, buried deep in denial, but she had promised him to allow happiness to come to her. She wouldn’t deny herself: I deserve better. And so does she. Lana pressed a kiss to the back of Mary Eunice’s head. Then, she tugged the blankets up over her own shoulders. Reclining there on the bed, she closed her eyes. Outside the room, the crickets purred their unique melody, and the southern night sky peered through the window with a moon brighter than she would ever see from Boston. Some part of this place would always be home to her; something about the red clay which she had painted on her face as a child would always run through her veins. The soothing lull of the forest passed her into a peaceful sleep in spite of all of her qualms trembling in her chest.

Hours later, Lana stirred from her dreamless sleep to the lamp flicking on. “Hm?” Her arm tightened its grip; Mary Eunice hadn’t budged an inch, and her steady breath puffed on, uninterrupted. Sleepy eyes drawing upward, Lana rubbed her eyes with her fist. What the hell? By the time her heart had the presence of mind to skip a beat, she locked eyes with her mother, and the panic of Who else is in the room? overlapped with Shit, she saw us. Lana set her jaw. Her arm didn’t withdraw from around Mary Eunice’s waist; it tightened, ready to hold her close, to defend her if the situation called for it. “Mama?”

Helen leaned into the dim lamplight. She wore a bandaid on her right brow. “Hey, sugar. Didn’t mean to wake you up.” A weak smile crossed her face, not quite meeting her eyes. “How are you? How is she?”

Don’t trust her. The coils in Lana’s stomach eased but didn’t dissipate at her mother’s friendly address. “I’m fine. She’s...” Mary Eunice nuzzled along the pillow until her face pressed at the hollow of Lana’s throat. Brilliant. Lana didn’t have the heart to push her away, but her heart floundered at the performance in front of her mother. “She’s shaken. But she’s not hurt. That’s what matters.” The unique scent of rain tied to Mary Eunice’s hair floated up to Lana’s nose, soothing her insides. “Thank you,” she whispered, an afterthought, “for saving her.”

Her mother’s upper lip flexed in disgust. “That man should never be allowed near a woman again. God knows what else he’s done—and who to.”

I know. Men are scum. Lana swallowed the dry flavor in her mouth, restraining her reflexive words—she knew they would only start debate, and she wanted to keep their voices soft to keep from disturbing her sleeping girlfriend. “Are you okay? And Frieda?”
Her hand floated to her brow, touching the bandage on reflex. “Me? Oh, I’m fine.” She peeled the bandage off of her cut brow. “I hit my head, but I’m healthy as a horse. The doctors sure did every test under the sun to make sure of it, too.” She leaned back in the chair, crossing her legs. She hadn’t taken off her church clothes, sitting there in her Sunday best, but she wore no shoes or her church hat, and without her makeup and the scent of her perfume faded, she made a picture of a mother Lana had never really known. “Frieda’s peachy, too. She thought her water broke, but it turned out she dropped her so hard, she peed. They were keeping her overnight to keep an eye on her, but she’s going to be alright.” Half of a smirk flexed onto her mouth. “When I left, she was reading John the riot act about not letting her get fixed. I think he’s finally going along with it. I think this little incident scared him. At least it served some good.”

“I thought you wanted her to have more children.”

“I did. But I would rather her be happy.” Helen’s brown eyes, the same shade as Lana’s, softened where she met her gaze. “I want the same for you. I hope you know that. Whatever it is you two…” She made a vague spinning gesture in the air with her hand. “Whatever it is you’ve got going on. I want you to be happy first.” I don’t believe you. Lana shrugged vaguely in reply, too tired to conjure an intelligent response; it was the wrong time of day for a debate, and she didn’t want to risk disturbing Mary Eunice’s sleep. “Why did you lie? About her? About all of this?”

Eyelashes fluttering, Lana quirked a brow at her mother, confused at first—but then she reconsidered. We made the whole thing look like a cover-up. “It wasn’t a lie.” Mary Eunice mumbled something unintelligible, turning her face into the pillow. Lana lifted her arm from around her middle and stroked her hair to soothe her. “None of it was a lie. I wouldn’t have brought her here otherwise.” You always could smell dishonesty, she wanted to say, and I prefer not having a bullet between anyone’s eyes. She bit the tip of her tongue. “We talked while we were in the creek, about—about us. But I didn’t lie to you. I was never good enough at it.”

Helen smiled, a small thing. “You made me believe you and Wendy were just friends.” Wendy. Lana averted her eyes. It wasn’t disloyal to love another. It wasn’t dishonest. Wendy wouldn’t fault her. I promised Mary Eunice I wouldn’t feel guilty. Longing stirred inside of her, a need to smell Wendy’s lotion again. I can’t help missing her. She breathed in the smell of Mary Eunice’s hair to ease the quivering nerves inside her stomach. “I’m sorry, Lana.” Her mother stood, and Lana expected her to leave the room—she had never cared for emotional expressions from any of her children—but instead, the mattress sank, and she curled up on the other side of Mary Eunice, squeezing all three of them tight into the queen-sized bed. “You said I was invited if I wanted to join you.”

Lana wriggled to the right. She tucked her arm around Mary Eunice’s waist again, tugging her back to make more room on the bed. “I did.” Mary Eunice stirred in her sleep, peeking up at Lana through half-opened eyes behind her tangled locks. “Sh, go back to sleep. I didn’t mean to wake you.” To her surprise, Mary Eunice didn’t utter a complaint, only forming a sleepy mumble in response. She’s exhausted. She didn’t even acknowledge the other presence in the room. Sucking on her lower lip, Lana watched the way her chest rose and fell with each steady breath, until she was confident her lover had fallen back asleep.

Her mother rested her cheek on the pillow, peering at her. “She’s pretty. You could do worse.”

“You don’t have to act like you like it.”

“I don’t. But you do. That’s what matters.” Lana kept her arm curled around Mary Eunice’s waist, prepared to protect her if the moment called for it. “I’m worried that she’ll hurt you.”

“I’ve already been hurt, Mama. It won’t take that away if I don’t let myself love her.”
“I know, sweetheart. I’m sorry.” Her mother leaned forward, almost on her lover’s hair, and she placed her hand on top of Lana’s. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t there with you. For you. And if she makes you happy, that’s what you deserve—every ounce of it, for as long as you live.” She squeezed Lana’s hand tight, lifting it up to her lips and planting a kiss on its back. “She’s a sweet girl. Knows her way around the kitchen. I bet she can take good care of you.”

Lana grinned in spite of herself. “You know there are more things to a relationship besides who cooks and who eats, don’t you?”

Helen winked at her. “I know you’re definitely not the one who cooks.” She allowed Lana’s hand to slip out of hers, instead reaching to tuck herself into the bed. “I love you. Both of you. Don’t forget it.”

“I love you, too, Mama.”

“Are you leaving tomorrow?”

She asked me to stay. Lana’s heart sank. She didn’t want to stay here any longer. Mary Eunice had been attacked, but that was just the bitter cherry on a shit sundae. They’d fallen into the creek, they’d lost Frieda’s girl, they’d had more arguments than she liked to count—coming here, after all these years, had stirred a pot Lana preferred to abandon. “I think so.” Her mother’s eyes glistened in the dim lamplight. “I might come back—next year—it’s just…” She shook her head. “We had to leave so fast, and with everything that happened—we’re both ready to go home and have some peace. I left my work, and I’m sure her priest has noticed she hasn’t been in touch with him. My friends reported us missing.”

“I—I understand, Lana. You don’t have to explain it to me.” But her mother’s smile was watery and weak. “I’m afraid to be alone here. But that’s not your problem.” She licked her lips. “It didn’t hit me, until tonight—that I’m alone, without him. That all you kids are grown, and this house is about to be empty except for me, myself, and I.” I know what that feels like.

Her home without Wendy was the emptiest thing she had never known. Walking in for the first time, seeing the blood stains in the carpet which had faded to the faintest of unnoticeable marks with time, not even having the heart to take down the cracked picture frames—it ripped the wound open again, knowing Wendy was gone and she would never walk down the hall or sink into the bed again.

“Maybe I’ll finally open up Frieda’s college fund and buy myself one of them fancy televisions. Back when we thought she might want to go to college—guess you can only have one smart kid in a family.”

In spite of herself, Lana opened her hand. “Maybe you’ll get lucky, and somebody will give you a —”

Her mother took her hand again, all weathered and calloused in her grasp. She had small, worn hands. “Not a nun, I’m not adopting anyone’s rejects into this house.”

Lana chuckled. “I was going to say dog. You could get a dog.” She let their palms press together like they did when she as a child, taking one of her parents’ hands and bending their fingers at the knuckle to examine how their tendons moved, how their knuckles rose up and ridged in response to the stimulus. As a girl, she had marveled at how her tiny hand fit right into her mother’s soft palm. But now, age and arthritis had folded her mother’s fingers downward and shortened them; Lana’s hands were larger than her mother’s, the same hands she had once known as larger than life. “Or a cat. You would be a good crazy cat lady.”

“You think?” Lana nodded. “Nah, we saw that bobcat. It’d be stupid for me to get cats. Or a dog, at that. Hate for my pet to get hurt.” Helen exhaled, long and gentle. “I don’t have a man to go hunting for it, either. I reckon Fred would do it for me, if I asked him, but I’d rather the damn
thing kill me and eat my corpse than lower myself to ask him for something. Old bastard ought to rot with the pastor.” She rolled onto her back, hand leaving Lana’s, and this time, Lana didn’t make any attempt to connect them. There were some wounds even human touch couldn’t remedy. “But I’m going to be real lonely. Even if I get to babysit—I’m sure Tim and Roger will swing by—but, lord… The house is going to be empty. Empty for real, not just empty like he’s in the hospital and he might be home next week. And there’s nobody to go see. Nowhere to go.” Her voice quivered. Lana’s lips warmed in response, shaking at the sound of her mother’s teary, hoarse voice. “Does it get easier?”

For a moment, she bit the tip of her tongue, uncertain how to answer and reluctant to give any response without full consideration. Did the loneliness get easier? She had Mary Eunice. She didn’t think about Wendy every waking minute of the day, and when she did, she had a pair of soft arms to hold her. When she had nightmares, Mary Eunice protected her. When she grieved, Mary Eunice comforted her. “I don’t know,” she said finally. “I—I have her.” She stroked her girlfriend’s hair with an absent hand. “The house isn’t empty while I’m with her.”

Her mother nodded, long and slow. “I’m glad you have someone. You don’t deserve to hurt.” Her hands bundled tight in the blankets. “Could I come with you? To Boston?”

Blinking from astonishment, Lana’s lips buffered against one another in an uncertain formation of meaningless syllables. “I—You—” Her mouth dried, tongue serving as a giant sponge, leaching her of all warmth. “You’d hate it there, Mama. It’s cold—It snows, there’s ice, and it rains a lot—you’d get yourself in trouble if you slipped and called somebody a slur—I’ve only got one bedroom…” I could tear down the office and make it into a bedroom. I told Mary Eunice I would, if she had a baby, and my mother is a lot more important than a nonexistent baby. “You can come with us if you want, but… I don’t want to hurt you, and I think it would. I live by my own rules there. All of my friends are like me. We go to a Catholic church. You’d lose everything you have here. I can’t live on eggshells around you. You aren’t happy with how I am here. You’d torment yourself there.”

“Is that how you feel? That you have to be on eggshells?” The light glinted in a tear rolling down her mother’s cheek.

Lana’s face relaxed, but she implored, “Mama. You told me the first night I was here you’d make me leave if I touched her. You put us in separate rooms. I know you’re trying, and I appreciate it, but… I’m not ready to be like that around you.” You broke my trust. You scarred me. You made me feel like I couldn’t invest anything in you, so now I’m not doing it. “There’s room in my car. But I think you belong here, where you can be with Frieda and her family. She would miss you.”

A tearful chuckle shook the bed. “I suppose I’m a few years too late to expect you to miss me.” Lana opened her mouth, hoping to stammer around an excuse which wouldn’t hurt her mother even more, but she was interrupted. “You’re right. We only buried him yesterday—two days ago.” It’s after midnight. What time is it? “Moving a thousand miles away won’t fix it.” Lana’s quelling insides calmed at the decision. She bit back a relieved sigh. “But I don’t want to lose you again. I messed up once, and that was my fault, but—I want to keep in touch with you. I know I don’t deserve it, but will you give me that? Will you promise me that?”

“I promise, Mama.” Sleepiness dragged at the backs of Lana’s eyelids, but she bit the inside of her cheek. “I’ve got a house phone like you. We’ll be able to call.”

“Right. We’ll call. Every day?”

“If that’s what you want.”
“No, you’re too old for that.” Thank god. Lana could think of little more tedious than calling her mother every day to give a daily report. “Once a week—twice a week. Twice a week. And then whenever you want. Is that okay?”

A sleepy grin crossed Lana’s face. “You weren’t this obsessive when we were leaving for college.”

Sighing heavily, her mother nodded. “I know. I know. I’m going crazy. I’m sorry. You don’t have to call me if you don’t want to. I know you came back for him, not for me.”

“I’ll call. I promise.” Helen wiped her tears away with the back of her hands. “You need to get some sleep, Mama.” Sniffling, she bobbed her head in agreement. “Get some rest. Okay? And then you should ask Frieda if you can stay with them for awhile and help her take care of the kids. She’s going to need more help, with two babies on the way.” Lana’s heart skipped a beat as her mother reclined in the bed, head easing on the pillow, and she waited with bated breath until she heard even snores. She’s going to be sick for missing him. Bowing her head, Lana nuzzled deep into Mary Eunice’s hair, all the more grateful for the soft, warm body beside her, offering some modicum of comfort which nothing and no one else could provide.

The night bled into the late morning with ease, when Mary Eunice finally stirred from her sleep. “Mmm…” A pair of arms had folded around her. “Lana,” she murmured, burrowing nearer under the blankets. “It’s cold.” She fumbled with a clumsy arm to wrap around the other woman’s waist and pressed her face against her chest. A shiver passed through her. A hand rubbed up and down her back, soothing her, but the limbs felt stiff. Did I wake her up?

“What time is it?” she whispered, a quiet afterthought.

The hand moved to her hair and combed through it where it had tangled in the night. “Almost noon, babygirl. Go back to sleep.” Not Lana. The voice was older, crackling at the edges. Lana would never call me that. Mary Eunice hitched a tight breath as she realized the body she had snuggled against was far too plump and smelled like Sister Jude’s incense rather than Lana’s sweet perfume. A whimper budded in her throat. Shoving herself away from the intruder, Mary Eunice pedaled across the bed, first instinct ordering her to put distance between herself and the intruder.

Her eyes locked on Helen. Oh. Oh, no. Tongue darting across her lips, she stammered, “Mrs. W-Winters. I—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—I thought you were”—Tears filled her eyes alongside the terror in her chest. She’s going to throw us out. Lana’s going to kill me. No, Mrs. Winters is going to kill us both. Iouted us. Oh, God, forgive me! A lump budded in her throat, and she fought to gulp the dryness around it.

Mrs. Winters held up a hand to her. “Hey—Hey, take it easy. I didn’t mean to scare you.” She extended an arm. Mary Eunice flinched away from her hand, but it landed on her bicep, and she held her breath, waiting for a slap of retribution, a string of curses. “Relax. I won’t hurt you, baby.” Her brown eyes, the same shade as Lana’s, held a tenderness Mary Eunice hadn’t noticed in them before. “Lana told me about the two of you. You don’t have anything to be afraid of from me, sweetheart.” She rubbed Mary Eunice’s bicep until the tension rolled out of the muscles. “Come here. You’re right, it’s chilly in here. We both had a long night.”

She opened her arms, an invitation for a hug. Mary Eunice’s chest ached at the sight. Folding herself down small, she inched into Mrs. Winters’s embrace. Those plump arms clutched her tight, the way Mary Eunice had always imagined a mother’s hug would feel. Tears stung the back of her eyes. The events from the night before came flowing back to her. “You—Are you okay? And Frieda—”

“Sh, baby.” Mary Eunice’s stammerings came to a sharp halt. “I’m okay. Frieda’s fine. Nobody
got hurt.” The man in her memory grabbed her thighs and wrenched them apart. She hiccuped, shutting her eyes tight to try and banish him from her mind. “You’re alright. You’re safe.” Mrs. Winters sat up a little to tug Mary Eunice on top of her, arranging them more comfortably, and Mary Eunice clung to her like a baby sloth to its mother’s back. “Are you okay, dear? Lana said you had a rough night.” Brushing her hair back out of her face, the unfamiliar eyes crawled all over Mary Eunice’s face; she could feel them, though she could not see them, with her eyes shut tight. “Hm?”

She gulped around the tight lump in her throat. Her voice, high-pitched and brittle, slipped through like a breeze through the cracks of a wooden treehouse. “I… I don’t feel so good,” she admitted. Mrs. Winters touched her cheek with the back of her hand, measuring her temperature. “Where’s Lana?” she asked, feeling quite like a petulant, unsatisfied child.

The hand moved to her forehead before it shifted back into her hair. “You feel a little warm.” Mary Eunice’s eyes fluttered closed. Holding them open was a struggle. “Lana ran into town to grab some things for you to take on your trip back up north. I’m sure she’ll be home soon.” A soothing stroke ran down her back. “Close your eyes. Get some more rest.” Mary Eunice shivered. In her memory, he kept reaching for her. Shadows moved behind him, demonic figments of her mind but real nonetheless. Her sharp shudder drew Mrs. Winters’s arms tighter around her.

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s okay. Can you hear me?” Mary Eunice nodded. “I heard you on the phone with the police yesterday morning. What you told them, about your mama and daddy.” Mary Eunice’s heart sank, cold, into the pit of her stomach; she needed no more reminders of anything horrible right now. The back of her tongue swelled up, like she wanted to puke. “I want to know—as long as you’re Lana’s, you’re mine, too. If you ever want something, or need something, I want you to feel like you can come to me.” Does she mean that? Mary Eunice rested her cheek on Mrs. Winters’s chest, hesitant at the sudden intimacy but too broken to discard it. “I always wanted a daughter with blonde hair.” A gentle laugh hiccuped through Mary Eunice’s distressed, quick breaths. “I did. I wanted a blonde daughter. It used to make Frieda so mad, when she was little, that she wasn’t blonde.” A hand massaged her shoulder. “Would you like that? To be my girl?”

Mary Eunice peeked up at her. Is it a trap? Nothing of her behavior had ever suggested malicious intent, but this? This was a mood swing larger than she had anticipated. “I would like that,” she whispered in response.

“Good.” Mrs. Winters held her gaze, reading the skepticism there. “You don’t have to look so afraid of me, babygirl. I know I hurt Lana before, but I want to fix that. I want to be her mama, the way I’m supposed to. And you deserve a family, too.” I believe her. Mary Eunice knew she was naive—if she knew nothing else, she knew of her own naivete—but she trusted the words of a mother pleading to win back her daughter’s heart. “You’re my girl now.” A soft thumb cradled her cheek. “Lana will be home soon, alright? And then you’ll be headed home. Just get some more rest for now. I won’t leave you.”

“Thank you,” Mary Eunice whispered. “For everything.”

“You’re welcome, darling.” A soft kiss pressed to the top of her head. Is this what it feels like to have a mama? Her heart, quivering with pins and needles inside of it, wondered if Lana would protest this arrangement. Helen had thrown her out; she hardly was in a position to start adopting more adult children into her circle of loneliness and grief. “Goodnight. Sleep well.” And Mary Eunice did in spite of the bright sunlight streaming through the window, peacefully falling back to sleep until her angel arrived to carry her home again.
The road in front of Lana’s house had never looked so inviting as when Mary Eunice turned off of the intersection and headed down the street toward the building she now knew as home. The icy streets skidded underfoot, and snow kept drifting down from the sky, muting any footprints left behind; the further north they drove, the more the weather worsened, and they’d donned more layers each day as they traveled, until now, when she finally pulled up in the driveway once again. Shifting the car into park, Mary Eunice placed her hand on her girlfriend’s shoulder and nudged her. “Lana?” she greeted in a low, soft voice. “Lana, we’re home.” They had traded positions behind the wheel at some point after Lana drove through DC (Mary Eunice had sworn off of going through the nation’s capital a second time, and this time, in the light of day, she got to admire the sights and the ethereal sensation of the center of the country), and Lana had fallen asleep with her head in Mary Eunice’s lap, snoring in a solemn peace in spite of the thickening clouds spraying snow at them.

Mary Eunice would admit, she had prayed her way most of the way here, and part of her feared the driveway and sidewalk would prove treacherous for making their way back into the house. “C’mon, wake up.” She stroked Lana’s hair, combing it back out of her peaceful face, until her eyebrows and eyelashes twitched in response. One brown eye peeked up at her, a bit reproachful at the disturbance, which made Mary Eunice’s tender grin widen. “We’re home.” She tugged the blanket from around Lana and folded it up. In the backseat, Gus whined, placing his head on the back of the seats to spy on them. “Wake up,” Mary Eunice said again. “It’s time to go inside.” Groaning, Lana sat up, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands. “You can go on inside, if you want. I can get the bags.”

Through narrow eyes, Lana blinked at her, before she slowly shook her head, the words settling upon her like the snowflakes upon the ground as her brain worked to awaken from its slumber. “No. I’ll help.” She stretched, long and languid, and found her coat in the floor of the car. “Ugh. I forgot about the snow.”

“Poor, miserable southerner,” Mary Eunice teased, and Lana swatted her on the wrist, both of them exchanging a smirk and a look softer than the inside of a Milky Way. “I’ll get Gus. I’m sure he has to potty.” Lana opened the door to her right and swung her legs out of the car. “Be careful! It’s icy.”

“I can see--” Lana’s feet scooped out from under her, and she wrapped herself around the door with a yelp of surprise, trying to support herself. “God, I miss the Georgia weather!” Her feet scrabbled on the ice, unable to get a grip, while she righted herself and sought traction. Mary Eunice covered her mouth with her hand, stepping out of the car, Gus scrambling after her. On the balls of her feet, Mary Eunice crept over the icy ground and into the grass, led by Gus, who pulled her toward his favorite bush. “How are you so good at this?”

“You have to walk like a penguin! Feet flat!” At her encouragement, Lana pushed herself up. She waddled around the car, one hand braced on it all the way around. “Here.” Mary Eunice tugged Gus off of his bush, where he had already lifted his leg and was deciding if he wanted to continue
marking his land or head inside to the warmth. He whined at her insistence, but he followed along, limping through the cold snow. “You take Gus. Let me get the bags. You’re going to hurt yourself.” Lana slipped toward her, crossing the treacherous terrain with tiny, flat steps, until she reached the threshold where the slick concrete met the grass and took an overconfident step forward. She pitched right at her girlfriend. Mary Eunice caught her with outstretched arms, both of Lana’s hands landing on her shoulders. “I’ve got you!” Harried brown eyes met hers. Feet still sliding backward, Lana’s stature shrank; she became horizontal. Mary Eunice tugged her forward, onto the grass, giggling in spite of herself. *She’s so adorable.*

The fat snowflakes landed in their hair and arranged a crown of melting ice for them. Even as her feet met solid ground, Lana held fast to Mary Eunice, but the panic ebbed from her eyes, replaced with affection. “You’ve got me?” Lana asked. *Yes, of course. Forever.* Mary Eunice hummed and nodded. Gus pulled on his leash at her wrist, but she ignored him. “Good. Don’t ever let go.” *I won’t.* She squeezed Lana’s waist tighter where her hands had caught her, an agreement to those terms.

Through the haze of falling flakes, something shuttered—the sound of a camera. “Hm?” Mary Eunice lifted her head from where she held Lana’s gaze. “I—I thought I heard something.”

“So did I.” Lana slipped Gus’s leash off of her wrist and led him away from the spot where they embraced. A nondescript black car rested across the street, window rolled down. “Hey!” The man behind the wheel flinched at her cry. He cranked the car and spun the window up as hard as he could. “Hey!” Lana jogged across the snow-covered grass, but she slid to a halt, losing her footing. The motor gunned, and the car jetted down the road. “Hey! God—*fuck.*” Lana slapped herself on the forehead. “Who was that? Did you see who it was?” She whirled upon Mary Eunice.

“I—” Mary Eunice’s voice caught in her throat. *I’m sorry.* “I didn’t see, I wasn’t watching him.” *I was watching you. I was looking into your eyes.* She gulped the dry lump in her throat, surprised at its appearance. *I forgot we weren’t safe here, either. I forgot we’re not safe anywhere.* “Lana?”

Lana took a deep breath. It clouded in the air in front of her face. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t shout.” She cleared her throat. “Let’s—Let’s go inside. Open our Christmas presents. I’ll call Walt and tell him not to run anything about us.”

“Will he listen?”

“He will if I threaten him enough.” Lana squeezed her hand tight. The fat flakes cascaded around them, a wintry wonderland, and formed a curtain around them. Mary Eunice batted a halo of flakes off of the top of Lana’s hair. *She’s an angel.* The cold flushed both of their cheeks pink, noses streaming. “I love you,” Lana whispered, so soft that the wind might have made the sound by lashing through the branches of the trees.

Mary Eunice stroked the back of her hand with her thumb. “I love you, too.” Their hands separated, blown away by the icy breeze, and she doubled back to fetch their suitcases, heart leaping to great heights within her chest.

Lana headed inside with Gus, releasing him into the house. He trotted to his rug in the living room floor and flopped down with a dramatic sigh. “Yeah,” she sighed. “Me, too, buddy.” She stretched, popping her back, but her whole body ached with stiffness from the days of travel. “Good god, it’s cold in here.” She headed to the thermostat and kicked the furnace on. *I’ve gotta call Mama. I promised her we’d call when we got here.* Reluctance plucked inside of her. She had never felt less like talking to her mother—or anyone, for that matter. I’ve got to call Walter, too, if I don’t want those pictures being run in the paper. *Fuck, I should do that one first.*
Fortunately, she had no struggle getting through to her boss. “Walt,” she greeted. “I asked you to call off your photographers from following me. What the hell was one doing waiting outside of my house?”

“Oh, Lana, don’t overreact. It’s a hot topic! You were gone, nowhere to be found! The public was worried!”

“Don’t run it.”

“You can’t ask me not to do that.”

“Not the article, you dumbass—” Lana realized a moment too late she had just sworn at her boss, but he didn’t interrupt her, making a deep clicking noise of displeasure in the back of his throat. “I don’t care if you run an article to tell the public I’m back in town and they can start bugging me again. Don’t run the goddamn pictures. Sister Mary Eunice’s priest was already mad about the last batch of them. I don’t want her getting in trouble because you can’t keep your cameramen to yourself. Don’t use her name—nothing. I don’t want her mentioned.” Lana’s heart skipped a beat, floundering up into her throat. Why not? She couldn’t answer the question. Mary Eunice doesn’t mind. Her toes curled into the thick shag carpet. I want to keep her safe.

Walt cleared his throat. “You were the first one to write an article naming Sister Mary Eunice when you publicized what happened in Waffle House in October. I’m following a trend.” Lana ground her jaw, loathing herself for what she had done in the spur of the moment in an attempt to harm a bigot. “And your insistence has me worried that you’ve got something to hide. You know journalists aren’t in the business of keeping secrets, right, Lana?”

“I have so many secrets. I don’t have any secrets. I don’t want random pictures of me and my friend in the newspaper. She hasn’t done anything to deserve all the stupid attention. Leave her alone.” He growled something on the other end of the line, but she wasn’t listening. “I gave you the cooking column again. I’m sending you opinion pieces three times a week—look, Walter, my book is almost done. I’m less than ten thousand words from finishing the rough draft. And if you want me to be your oyster once it’s published, you’ll have your nosy vultures stay out of my business.”

“I’m promising. My foot’s in the door. I’ve been in contact with a publisher. From here, I can write whatever I want—fiction, non-fiction—and I’m in a good position to become a telejournalist.” He didn’t answer her. His heavy breath fanned over the line to her, reaching an impasse with himself. I’m not going to be your sideshow attraction anymore.

Lana swallowed hard, her throat dry. She had slaved over her writing in the months approaching Christmas—and though she wouldn’t admit it to herself, she hoped to have payments rolling in by Mary Eunice’s birthday, so she could take her to do something fun. “Walt, I don’t need you anymore. I’m about to be a very wealthy woman. I’m willing to keep writing for you because I care about the Globe, but I’m not going to be your circus anymore. If you want my name in your paper, don’t run anything about me, or especially about Sister Mary Eunice, or any of my friends.”

Walt cleared his throat. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll pitch them. Merry Christmas, Lana.” His words were cold. He hung up on her before she could reply.

Sighing, Lana dropped her telephone on the receiver, as well. She massaged her temples. Perhaps he wouldn’t respect her anymore. I don’t care. I don’t care what anyone thinks anymore. The front door slammed closed, a gust of cold air following Mary Eunice as she headed into the living room. She dropped her bags in the floor and kicked off her wet shoes, hanging up her coat, before she carried the bags toward the hallway. “Hey, Sister?” Mary Eunice paused and glanced back at
her. “Don’t--Don’t worry about unpacking, yet. We can do it later.” Mary Eunice nodded in agreement. Lana spun the chair back around and picked up the telephone again, dialing for the operator. “Hi, I--I need to make a long distance call to Toombs county, Georgia.”

“That’ll be seventy cents a minute, ma’am. Do you accept the charges?”

“Yes.” The line worked through until another operator, presumably much farther away, answered. “I need to reach the house of Landon and Helen Winters.”

The phone dialed a few times before her mother’s familiar voice answered the phone. “Southern Grove, 8-9687.”

“Hey, Mama, it’s me. We just got home.” Lana placed her elbow on the desk, supporting her chin in her hand. “I think this is the most money I’ve ever spent on you,” she teased, half-hearted and light. “I can’t stay on long. Are you alright?”

Helen cleared her throat. “Lana? Yeah, yeah, I’m… I’m fine.” I don’t believe you. “I’m sorry. I’ll call you next time, so I’ll take the charges.” She yawned, long and deep, into the phone. “Mm. Excuse me. Are you both well? Not too cold, I hope?”

Lana laughed in spite of herself. “I almost broke myself getting out of the car. The driveway is solid ice. I’m not very good at being a Yankee in the winter. But I’ve got Sister Mary Eunice to keep my head on straight.” Cold hands pinched at her shoulders and ran through her hair, stroking her; she tilted her head back to look up at her girlfriend, who smiled a tender, lopsided thing. “But we’re fine. Both of us. Gus, too, but he’s pretty jetlagged. He made it no further than the rug.”

Her mother chuckled a weak, light thing. “I still can’t believe I raised you to have an indoor dog. Where could I have possibly gone wrong?” Lana grinned, leaning into Mary Eunice’s soft touch. “I’m glad you’re alright. I won’t keep you, then, baby girl.” Smile vanishing, Lana cringed, but her mother amended, “Wait--you said you didn’t want to be called that. I remember now. I’m sorry, darling.”

“It’s alright, Mama. Are you alone?”

“Alone?” she echoed, sounding a little dazed. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m alone. Tim and Roger are at work. Frieda offered to come over, but--is it bad to say I’ve had enough of her kids for the next few weeks? I know I’m their granny, but living with them like that was hard. And--anyway, it can’t be good for her to be moving all of them back and forth so much. Tim said he’d swing by tonight and have dinner with me. Roger’s busy, though, with someone at the department.” Someone at the department. Lana nibbled on her bottom lip, wondering when--if ever--Roger would come out about his relationship. Timothy could smother his, maybe forever, maybe for the rest of his life, and keep things under wraps. But Roger couldn’t hide a baby or an unwed mother. He would either claim them or leave them. And she knew her family well enough, knew her brother well enough, to know he would never walk away from something he felt responsible for. “The house has been so quiet today.” I know. I know how it feels. “It feels empty. I feel empty. I think this is the first time I’ve spoken to someone all day.”

Seventy cents on the minute didn’t taste as bitter in Lana’s mouth at the sound of her mother’s distress. “Mama? Have you been drinking?”

“No. Not today. I--I had a drink last night to help me sleep, but not today. I’m just lonely. Listening to the radio, forgetting where I am. Church isn’t having any service, since they can’t find a replacement for Pastor Johnson. Sick old fucker.” She cleared her throat. “I think I might get me a dog, just like you said. Big dog. Big enough to take out that bobcat if I need it to.”
“I think that’s a good idea.”

“I’ll let you go, Lana. It’s good to hear your voice. I love you. Tell Sister Mary Eunice I love her too.”

“We love you, too, Mama. Call me if you need anything, alright? I’ll be here.”

“I will. And you call me, alright? Don’t be a stranger. Goodnight, sweetheart.”

“Goodnight, Mama.” She placed the telephone back in the cradle with a small smile. Mary Eunice combed her hands through Lana’s hair. Lana spun the chair around to look at her, head tilted back, lips curled upward. “I took care of Walter. We don’t have to worry about anything.” Mary Eunice grinned. “Let’s have Christmas.”

Like little girls, they folded themselves in front of the Christmas tree with their legs crossed, the tiny lights twinkling on the tinsel. In front of the window, on a backdrop of a winter wonderland, Lana pushed the first of Mary Eunice’s gifts toward her. “Open this one first.” Mary Eunice nudged a box at her, one of her own gifts, before she lifted up the one Lana had proffered.

She lifted the box to her ear like a child. “Can I shake it?”

“You can shake all of them. Nothing will break.” Lana shook her own box. Fabric rustled inside of it. _It’s light._ Lana’s mind churned, trying to think of what Mary Eunice could’ve managed to get her without money or leaving the house alone. _She was doing a lot of knitting._ Every hour I spent writing, she spent knitting. Lana quirked her brow. She hadn’t seen Mary Eunice wear anything she’d made, nor had she dropped the things off in the donation bin at church like she said she would. _She was knitting for me!_ Lana’s cheeks warmed at the realization. Mary Eunice had been making her Christmas present right in front of her, and she hadn’t realized it. She hadn’t noticed anything strange about her harried behavior in throwing together yarn and spinning faster, asking about the particular shade she liked best, about the texture she found softest. “Alright,” Lana said, shaking herself. “On three, we open.” Mary Eunice nodded, her enthusiasm glowing in her brilliant eyes. _God, I love her so much._ “One, two, three.”

Sliding her fingernail under the wrapping paper, she rolled it back and lifted the sweater out of the box. The plain pale blue material, the shade she had said matched Mary Eunice’s eyes once, glowed up at her. As her hands grazed it, she soaked in the softness of the yarn, luxurious in its texture. “Oh, Mary Eunice, it’s beautiful.” Intricate designs formed little flower shapes with twists and braids in the strings. “You’ve been working on this since October.”

“Do you like it?”

The nervous voice drew Lana’s attention, and she jerked her head up. “Of course I--” Mary Eunice’s box rested in her lap, untouched. “Hey--you didn’t open yours! You tricked me!”

Her eyes fluttered wide with surprise. “Oh, I--I forgot--I was so busy watching you, I forgot--you just looked so nice, with your…” She drifted off as Lana scooted closer to her. A pink blush trickled over her face. Swallowing hard, she tore open the package without another moment of hesitation. Inside, a simple book labelled _Holy Bible_ rested face-up, clean and crisp and untouched. “Oh, Lana…” She lifted the brand new book from its box, the sides of the pages shiny, a velvet bookmark sticking out of the front cover. “It's lovely. You shouldn't have.” Lana placed a hand at the base of Mary Eunice’s spine and trailed it upward. She shivered in return. With her other hand, she flipped open the front cover of the Bible, where inside, she had written,

_To Sr. Mary Eunice. May this bring as much light into your life as you have brought into mine. All my love, Lana._ “Oh!” Her cry, almost pained in its sound, echoed inside of Lana’s chest. She dashed at the corners of her eyes with her fingertips, but it didn’t stem the flow of the tears.
escaping. “Lana, I--I don't know what to say.”

Lana kissed a falling tear away. “Don't say anything,” she murmured. No one ever made you feel loved enough. It's not fair. It's not fair that you think this is special because you've never gotten a gift before in your life. “Here.” She nudged another box into Mary Eunice's lap. “Don't cry. It's okay. You deserve this. You deserved it all your life.” She ran her hand through Mary Eunice's hair, still damp from the heavy snow falling outside. “Open it.”

One by one, they opened their gifts--Lana predicted hers, gloves and socks and a hat, while Mary Eunice found a rosary and a prayer journal for her to continue after her old one was destroyed in her possession. (Each of her gifts made her weep, so she earned a smattering of kisses from Lana, who reassured her it wasn't too much; she was worth everything she pulled out of the cardboard boxes.) Then, Mary Eunice came to her last box. She didn't hesitate at this one, her fingernails tearing into the wrapping paper and then the cardboard to reveal a stack of fabric, black material and white separately, several types of thread and new needles. “I…” Mary Eunice looked up at Lana. “I don't understand.”

“You told me it's traditional to--to sew your own habit. I know you've been wearing Jude’s old one for months now, since your old one was destroyed, but I thought it was time for you to get your own.” Her wide eyes filled with tears once again, shining like the surface of a blue lake, and Lana extended a hand to cup her cheek, thumb fitting right on the rise of her cheek bone. “I’ve got a sewing machine. You can have the kitchen table, or I could move my typewriter and you can have the desk--” Mary Eunice wrapped her in a hug so tight, her breath vanished from her lungs, and she choked on it, arms hesitant to reciprocate the sudden embrace. The wet face didn't hide itself, but rather smacked a hot kiss on her cheek. Her body is so soft. She smells so good. Lana inhaled the scent of her girlfriend, face burrowing into her neck, and with the same vitality that Mary Eunice had seized her, Lana clung to her, refusing to let her leave. The tension in the hug, the muscles flexing like bear digging its claws into its prey, grabbed all of Lana’s broken pieces, all the shattered bits of her heart, and stuck them back together one by one. Mary Eunice tried to pull away once, but when Lana didn’t let go, she clutched her without another shred of hesitance.

Mary Eunice exhaled a shaky breath into her ear. “Thank you, Lana.” Her breath whistled in her throat. “Thank you. Thank you.” She rested her chin on Lana’s shoulder. The weight there warmed the pit of her stomach. “I--I know it bothers you, the habit--I won’t wear it if you don’t want me--”

“I got it for you to wear it.” Lana pushed back to tuck a loose strand of blonde hair behind her ear, greasy from the days of travel without a shower. “I want you to wear it. As much as you want. In bed, even, if you want.”

The tip of her nose crinkled. “It’d be awfully itchy.”

A shaky chuckle rose from Lana’s throat, strained by the joy swallowing her heart in her chest which drove tears to her eyes and made her want to fasten herself to the front of Mary Eunice’s shirt like a button. “Then maybe not in bed.” She pecked a gentle kiss on her pink lips. Mary Eunice smiled into their tender touch. “Okay. This is my last one.” She lifted the light box to her ear and shook it gently, listening to the fabric rustling inside, so she tore it open to find a scarf. But unlike the other items, which all were a monotone hue of various yarns, the scarf had started a solid forest green, and halfway through, the color switched to a bright yellow. “What’s this?” she asked, pulling it up out of the box and draping it over her neck.

“I found it,” Mary Eunice said. Lana arched an eyebrow at her. “Half of it. The green. Wendy had started it, and it was still attached to the yarn, but the ball was almost empty, so I switched to the yellow to finish it--because you call me sunshine.” Her cheeks flushed. “I know it doesn’t match everything else, but I thought you would want it…” Mary Eunice drifted off as Lana bowed her
head into the soft yarn of the scarf, inhaling deeply, like she could smell Wendy’s essence on the part her hands had touched, had formed with her own labor. Tears stung the back of her eyes. *It’s perfect.* Her throat had closed up, so she reached for Mary Eunice, and her girlfriend needed no more encouragement to sweep her up into her arms. “I love you, Lana.”

In a haphazard tangle of limbs, Lana slid into Mary Eunice’s lap, burrowing her face in the scarf. At first, she fought to choke back the tears budding in her throat, but the lump pushed past her desperate swallows. The scarf carried a piece of Wendy, but it carried a piece of Mary Eunice, too, a special blend of both of them which blessed Lana with more overwrought emotions than she liked to consider. The sorrow wrenched inside of her gut and twisted, the knife plunging deeper each time she remembered how Wendy’s arms had held her just like this. But an overwhelming joy rose up, too, something fuzzy and soft and aching inside of her, the thought, *How lucky am I?* repeating itself over and over—not lucky because of all she had endured, but lucky to have found someone else to hold her tight and squeeze the grief out of her like wringing out an old sponge. “M-Mary—” she gasped in a helpless sob, wrenching it from herself. She strained to lift her head, to look Mary Eunice in her azure eyes like the sky, and in spite of the snot rolling from her nose and over her lips in a thick, sticky sheen, Mary Eunice kissed her. A heavy shudder passed through her body. “Oh, god…” She shook too hard for her voice to remain steady. “You don’t—You don’t know what this—means—to me.”

Smearing away her tears and snot with the backs of her hands, Lana tried to extricate herself from Mary Eunice’s lap, but she couldn’t manage to pedal away from her with her shaking limbs, and the body cradling her was so inviting. “I know how much you miss her. I wish I could do more.”

Her teeth chattered. “You—You are enough—”

“Oh, Lana, I know. I wish I could take all of your hurt away, all of it.” She kissed the top of her head. “I would take it all away if I could. I would take it all onto myself in a heartbeat. You deserve to feel nothing but love.”

*How do you feel so highly about me? How do you treat me like this? How do you love me like a queen when I have made so many mistakes?* “I—I feel the same way about you.” Her hands shook, sweat coating them and snot stringing from their backs. She touched Mary Eunice’s face, cupping a cheek in each palm. Their noses brushed, but they didn’t kiss again. “I never want you to hurt.” Lana steadied her breaths, lips and teeth trembling. “You’re so good—so good. You’re perfect, and I don’t want you to doubt that, ever. Please, don’t ever doubt how much you mean to me, or how much you’re worth.”

She reached into the pocket of her skirt, fumbling a little, and Mary Eunice relinquished her so she could grab the silver chain she had purchased at the last gas station they had passed. It was simple, only three dollars, and she considered it worth every penny. She tugged it out, the chain threaded through the ring her brothers had given her. “Lana, that’s—”

“How do you feel so highly about me? How do you treat me like this? How do you love me like a queen when I have made so many mistakes?” Lana untied the leather necklace with the cross fashioned from nails from around Mary Eunice’s neck and fastened the new chain around her instead so the ring, the charm, fell right at the hollow of her neck. Wiping her nose with her hands, she shook her head, trying to clear it. “I bought it for you. The chain. Since we saw it doesn’t fit, I—I want you to have it.” Lana gave her a watery smile, the best she could manage. *I didn’t mean to cry all over her. I didn’t expect that scarf.* A single spidery hand fluttered to the ring, fingering it, and Lana smiled at the sight, Mary Eunice touching the ring which had run in her family for generations. Perhaps it ended here—after all, she had no clue what would happen to it after her death, if it would wind up in an antique shop with no name or history attached—but while she had it, she wanted to see it on the woman she loved. “It’s yours now. A symbol of the part of me that belongs to you. Please, keep it.”
Mary Eunice’s throat bobbed as she swallowed. Her light hand left her neck, but instead, it went to her other hand, tugging away her wedding band—the one which promised her to God. A white mark on her finger marked where it had rested for so long. “Then take mine.” She took Lana’s hand and unfurled her fingers, sliding the delicate band onto her ring finger. “It fits you.” Lana bent her hand, the weight of the ring foreign, creasing, cold to the touch. She ran her thumb over it. *No, this isn’t right.* It reminded her of her lover, but it didn’t belong to her, had no place on her hand. She slid it off. Mary Eunice’s face fell in dismay. “Lana, I want you to have it.”

“This is for you and God.” Lana lifted Mary Eunice’s hand and turned it palm-up, stroking the callouses where they smattered the area. “It isn’t for me. It represents the parts of you that belong to God.”

Her hand closed into a loose fist, refusing to unbend so Lana could replace the ring on her finger. “All of me belongs to God. That doesn’t mean it can’t also belong to you.”

Lana held her gaze. “There are parts of you I cannot have. I would never ask you to give up anything for me—your faith is you, and I love you. But I can’t accept this.” She dropped it into her hand and rolled it up tight. “You are already married. It would be wrong for me to take something that doesn’t belong to me at all. That is a symbol of what isn’t mine. I won’t take it from you.” She released Mary Eunice’s hand and touched her cheek, brushing her long hair out of her eyes and tucking it behind her ears. Tears rose to the surface of her eyes. “Don’t cry,” Lana whispered. “Do you understand? Why I can’t take it?” *I could not take something that was Wendy’s and give it to you,* she wanted to say, but she bit her tongue. Mary Eunice bobbed her head in agreement, closing her eyes. She folded the ring back close to her heart, sliding it back onto her finger, where it fit into the pale line of flesh which had borne the precious item for so long. *You are not the only one of us with two loves.* Lana trailed her thumb over the pad of her lover’s lips.

Mary Eunice kissed her fingertips. “Thank you, Lana.” She fingered the antique ring on her necklace. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Lana studied her red-streaked face in the low light of the living room. *Mine must look just like that.* They had both wept their way through Christmas presents like a couple of babies. “Do you want to take a shower?”

Mary Eunice blinked in surprise, and she tugged her hand away from Lana’s, shaking her head. “No, you can go first. I’ll clean up this mess and get started on dinner.” The wrapping paper and empty boxes littered the living room floor where they had discarded them in favor of the gifts within. “What do you want? We could have some spaghetti.” She staggered to her feet, a little dizzied by her own mind, and offered Lana a hand to help her to her feet. Part of her, a tiny part, ached with rejection that Lana wouldn’t accept her ring—the only thing she had to offer even close to parallel with the charm Lana had given her. *But I understand.* Her wedding band symbolized her commitment to God. If Lana had given her a ring which symbolized her dedication to Wendy, she wouldn’t have wanted to accept it. She didn’t want to act as a replacement for Wendy; she knew she could never measure up. *I don’t want Lana to replace God at all. I love her in a different way.*

Lana tangled their fingers together as she struggled to her feet, knees cracking. “No, I meant—I meant if you wanted to shower together. With me.”

Her jaw dropped open. *What?* “We—We can do that?” Tongue flapping loosely about, Mary Eunice fought for a shred of coherence as Lana nodded, her eyebrows quirking together in mingled concern and confusion. “I—I didn’t realize that was an option.”

Chuckling, Lana smirked back at her. Her red-rimmed eyes and tear-streaked face robbed her of no beauty, leaving her the same Lana who Mary Eunice cherished. “We can do whatever we
want. Everything is an option.” Everything? What is everything? Mary Eunice had no point of reference to imagine the possibilities stretched out before them, and somehow that made everything more tantalizing, the unknown luring her with its temptation. Temptation. She had learned the word to mean evil, but Lana had never looked so pure to her. “We don’t have to if you don’t want to. I just thought I would—”

“I want to!” Mary Eunice clapped a hand over her mouth to silence the cry, but it ripped from her throat, betraying her excitement. Lana’s grin widened. “I–I mean, yes, I would like that, I didn’t mean to shout…” Mary Eunice cleared her throat, forming a sheepish smile.

Lana caught her by both hands. “I didn’t think you’d be so excited about it.” Tugging on her, they headed down the hall to the bedroom, with the bed messy and unmade just as they had left it before Christmas when they had thrown their things together and fled the winter weather. The furnace kicked off, having reached its target temperature, and a chill permeated the room in its silence.

Her face flushed. I didn’t mean that, I didn’t mean to shout, I just love you, and you’re so pretty, and— “Will we be… naked?” she asked, whole face a-flame. Maybe I shouldn’t. This is embarrassing. I don’t know anything. I’ll say the wrong thing. I’m stupid. Am I allowed to look at her? At the mere mention of nudity, she pinched her eyes closed, afraid of seeing something Lana didn’t want her to see.

To her surprise, Lana stopped, slowing to a halt before her feet hit the tile floor. “Do you usually shower with clothes on?” she asked, a light teasing tone to her voice. Mary Eunice’s belly pooled with shame. “You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to.” A soft hand touched her cheek. Her eyelashes fluttered, but she kept them pinched shut. “Hey. I’m still fully dressed. Look at me.” Releasing a pent-up breath of air, she allowed them to fall open, locking gazes with Lana. “I don’t want you to do anything you’re not comfortable with. If you’re not ready for this, I don’t expect you to do it. I’m not going to be upset if you don’t want to.”

Licking her lips, Mary Eunice said, “I—I want to.” Lana stroked the back of her hand, fingers trembling. “I’m afraid, I am, but I don’t want to be afraid. I want to do this with you. Anything that scares me—it doesn’t matter, as long as I’m with you. I trust you more than I fear anything.” She glanced down to where Lana stroked her hand, and then she lifted her head to look Lana in the eyes. “I want to do it with you. Just don’t let me do anything silly, please.”

“You won’t.” Lana lifted her hand to her lips and kissed it. “I promise.” She tugged her into the bathroom and closed the door all the way so Gus wouldn’t barge in on them. “Do you want me to undress you?” she asked.

Oh, I don’t know. Mary Eunice sucked on her lower lip. Lana had seen her naked body before, more than once, but in the sheer, unforgiving white light of the bathroom, she feared everything would become more apparent, all of her flaws drawn to the surface. But did she prefer for Lana to undress her, or would she instead turn her back and return to Lana nude like some kind of circus animal? Face flushing hotter than she imagined possible, she nodded in agreement. “Please.”

Lips pressed flush against hers, and Lana’s cool hands slipped underneath her shirt and lifted it above her head. Mary Eunice lifted her arms and broke the kiss for Lana to tear the shirt away. Those gentle hands traveled across her torso, squishing the pudge of her belly (she giggled when Lana grazed her fingertips across her belly, and goosebumps appeared all over her arms, nipples hardening in her bra), heading up her ribs, stroking back down her back. Lana took one of Mary Eunice’s hands and planted it at the hem of her own sweater. I can take it off. She needed no more prompting to place both of her hands on Lana’s waist. First, she mapped Lana’s body through her clothing, and then she looked up to her girlfriend. “Can I…?”
Her awe-struck eyes marveled at the brown of Lana’s irises, sweeter than any chocolate she had ever tasted. “Please do.”

Hooking her fingers under the hem of the sweater, she lifted it up and helped Lana tug her arms through the sleeves. The light illuminated all of the scars they shared, the burn scar below Mary Eunice’s navel, the surgical mark below Lana’s, the stretch marks where they both had grown. Mary Eunice traced each dark purple stripe on Lana’s sides with her fingers, worshipping the body in front of her. Lana’s armpits had dark, wiry hair protruding from them, not completely grown in but nearing it. She trailed her fingers up from Lana’s belly button to the base of her breast bone, where her breasts lay hidden in white cups. **She is so beautiful.** For a second time, she looked to Lana for confirmation. “Go ahead.”

Smooth as a hummingbird’s wings, she unclasped the bra from the back, but the years of indoctrination poisoned her thoughts, and as the garment whistled to the floor, she pinched her eyes closed, sucking in a tight breath. **God, forgive me for my lust.**

Lana stepped nearer to her, her breath fanning across her face. Her lips fixed to the junction between Mary Eunice’s neck and shoulder, hands starting at the small of her back and sliding up to her bra. “May I take this off?”

*May I,* a request, probing like a cat using its whiskers to navigate a dark room. Mary Eunice nodded, breath tight in her chest, humming a thin affirmation. The cold air crossed her breasts. A shiver passed through her, and she knew Lana could see her in the full light. “You’re so beautiful,” Lana whispered. “Open your eyes,” she murmured. “Look at me.”

She did, eyelashes fluttering. First, she gazed into Lana’s warm eyes. *I’m afraid.* She had learned this was a sin, and she struggled to purge the fire from her veins, the urge to flee the sight of a naked woman and drop to her knees in a prayer for forgiveness. Her gaze wandered down the expanse of Lana’s neck and her collarbones. Her chest swelled. Then, her large, round areolas circled her protruding nipples. The brown hue of the areolas caught her off-guard. “I thought they were pink.”

The words slipped from her lips. She clenched her jaw tight together too light to suck the words back inside of herself. Lana quirked her brows. “What?”

*Oh, goodness.* Mary Eunice’s furious blush returned tenfold. “I—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say that.” She cleared her throat, but Lana’s raised eyebrow refused to let the matter lie, so with an awkward cough, she mumbled, “I thought your nipples were pink.”

Teeth peeking out from her lips in a grin, Lana laughed at her, but the sound was strained. **Did I hit a nerve? I shouldn’t have said anything. Why did I blurt that out? That was so stupid.** “Why would you think that?” Lana asked. She extended a hand, pressing it to the globe of Mary Eunice’s right breast, framing the tiny, rosebud nipple between her thumb and forefinger. “Did you assume everyone had nipples like you?”

“No, I—” **Shut up!** Mary Eunice bit the tip of her tongue. She gulped; she had already begun to speak, and Lana was expectant, and she had never learned how to lie. “Please don’t be mad,” she squeaked.

Lana’s lips formed an O of surprise. “Mad? I’m not mad—why would I be mad?”

Biting her lip, Mary Eunice winced. “I read Wendy’s journal.” Lana’s jaw closed with a click. **Oh, no…** Her heart sank, and she scrambled to defend herself. “I didn’t mean to—I was cleaning out the closet, and I found it, and I thought it was just an old notebook, since you had a lot of college notes and stuff that I was throwing away, so I opened it to see what it was, and—it was just on that page, where she talked about—about when you made love for the first time.” She swallowed hard, mouth suddenly dry. “I didn’t know how to tell you, so I just left it alone. But
Wendy said your nipples were pink. I don’t know why I remembered that. I didn’t mean to say that, I just thought it… out loud.” Shut up. You’re so stupid. You haven’t even taken your skirt off yet, and you’re already saying and doing stupid things. You just promised to try not to do anything silly, and here you are.

The tightness in Lana’s jaw disappeared, flexing loose again, but her grin didn’t return, replaced by a halfhearted grimace. “They were, then. They were pink, before I got pregnant.” Oh. Mary Eunice’s face fell. I did touch a nerve. Her jaw hung loose, so Lana planted a tender kiss on her lips. Her hand remained on the fatty part of Mary Eunice’s breast, the other one planting itself on her shoulder, tugging her closer. She buried her mouth into the kiss. Their bare fronts brushed, breasts teasing one another.

Their tangled lips separated. I can still taste her. “You’re beautiful, Lana.” Through sheer willpower, she forced herself to study the bare top half of Lana’s body where every instinct told her to look away and keep her perverse eyes to herself. Part of her wanted to fondle Lana’s breasts. Don’t. She might not like it. She slid Lana’s hand up her breast, cupping it, nipple hardening into her palm. “It’s cold.” Goosebumps flecked all over her exposed arms and chest.

Lana laughed, a breathless thing, at the compliment. “Thank you.” She removed her hand from Mary Eunice’s breast and planted them on her hips. “Let’s get rid of these clothes and get in the shower to warm up. Hm?” Yes, let’s do that. Mary Eunice nodded. Lana hooked her fingers into the hem of her skirt and unbuckled it, letting it slide down and pool around her feet. Around the hem of her panties, clumps of dark reddish-cream pubic hair stuck out, too wild to be tamed into her underwear. Mary Eunice reached to unbuckle Lana’s skirt in turn, letting it fall, and she studied her mound, blush bleeding into her arms as she studied the cotton barrier between her and Lana’s most intimate parts. Lana trailed a finger up the inside of Mary Eunice’s thigh, over the yellowing bruises the minister had left behind. At the sensation, ice cubes rolling down her back, Mary Eunice shuddered, and Lana grinned up at her, a devilish thing. She waited for a nod of encouragement before she worked the panties down to Mary Eunice’s ankles. She kicked them away and discarded them.

The curls between her legs sprang upward, sunflowers lifting their heads toward the sky. Lana extended a hand toward her, as if to brush her fingers through the wiry garden of hair, but she reconsidered and drew back, instead shifting her pelvis forward. Mary Eunice cupped a hip bone in either hand. She swallowed hard, mouth dry as the desert, as her fingers traced the top hem of Lana’s panties. Just take them down. It isn’t that hard. Lana wouldn’t let you if she didn’t want you to do it. Like hearing her thoughts, Lana placed her hands over Mary Eunice’s, folding her fingers down into her underwear. The mocking voices inside of her, the parts naming her a pervert, an abomination, droned louder and louder, alongside the sound of her own blood rushing through her ears. Her eyes pinched closed again. “Lana, I…” I don’t think I can do this.

But Lana worked her hands down, helping her slide the underwear down. Mary Eunice’s breath hitched. Her knuckles, fingers wrapped around the top of Lana’s panties, scraped down the swells of Lana’s fuzzy thighs, down to her knees, which bore a stubble of shaven hair left untouched for sometime, before she released the cotton fabric and let it fall to the floor. Lana cradled her face in her hands. “You can open your eyes.”

Biting her lower lip, she shook her head. “I don’t think I can.” Her voice emerged in a thin whisper. “I—I’m afraid.”

“What makes you afraid?”

Sucking on her top teeth, Mary Eunice considered. The burbling terror in the pit of her stomach had no apparent source: the voices of a thousand priests condemning the lustful gaze and the woman of temptation who would lead them astray, the crack of Sister Jude’s cane across her rear
end if Spivy masturbated at the sight of her, the whispered words behind closed doors about every homosexual Briarcliff had ever housed. “Lust is a sin. I feel lust for you.” A fire ignited in the pit of her belly, trickling down lower, into the places no one had ever touched. “I don’t want to look at you like a pervert. I don’t want to look at you like a man.”

Thumbs stroked her cheekbones and tugged her face. Mary Eunice puckered her lips on reflex, expecting to encounter Lana’s mouth, but instead, Lana placed her mouth on her neck; her pulse throbbed right at the tip of her nose. “Nothing about you is like a man.” Her vocal cords rumbled against Mary Eunice’s lips. She peppered a thin string of kisses down her voice box, where each syllable and sound rose up with a smooth vibration. “I would never let a man be with me like you can be with me.” Lana’s loose hair tickled her face. “You told me love between a man and a woman is holy. You must believe our love is, as well.” Mary Eunice hummed an approving note. She folded at the waist to reach more of Lana’s neck, stopping at the hollow of her throat between her collarbones and her breastbone. “You are not perverted for having desires. I can assure you of that.” A thumb hooked underneath Mary Eunice’s chin and tilted her head up. She straightened her shoulders and stood up straight. “Do you believe me?”

“Yes.”

“Look me in the eyes.” Eyelashes fluttering, she fought every instinct and misgiving to look into Lana’s soft eyes. A tender smile appeared on her lips. Her hand left Mary Eunice’s chin to take her by the hand. “I’m freezing my ass off.” The blunt sentence made Mary Eunice’s chest tremble with laughter. “Let’s get in the damn shower.”

As the distance between them grew, Mary Eunice scanned Lana’s naked body, analyzing it for the first time in full detail under the bright light of the bathroom. The stretchmarks on her sides, purple in some places and white in others, marked her abdomen and hips and thighs. Her dark brown hair, almost black, grew in a coarse garden of wires, some of the hairs beginning to tint silver but not quite gray enough to be noticeable. Fine dark hair laced over her thighs, but she shaved below the knee, her stubble just visible. She’s beautiful. Mary Eunice was afraid to say the words aloud, afraid to tell Lana she had looked, though Lana could see her wandering eyes. Instead, she said, “I’m excited.”

Lana turned on the faucet. “It’s not as much fun as you think it is,” she said, but her smirk didn’t ebb. “It usually means one person gets to enjoy the hot water while the other stands back, wet and cold, and then we switch halfway through.” Mary Eunice laughed. Lana jerked the knob for the shower head to come on, and then she pulled the shower curtain back, stepping into the shower as the steam clouded the room. Mary Eunice lingered outside until she thrust her arm back out of the shower. “Are you coming in here, or are you going to stand there and shiver?”

Eyes widening, Mary Eunice skipped into the shower to join her. “I’m coming with you.” She grinned at the sight of Lana, the steam gray between them. “It’s--It’s warm in here.” The water jetted into her hair, matting it into drenched strings. “Now--Now what?”

Squirting shampoo out into her hand, Lana grinned. “Now what? What do you usually do in the shower? Turn around. I’ll wash your hair.” But I want to look at you! Mary Eunice didn’t hesitate to follow Lana’s command, nonetheless, whirling on the tips of her toes. “You’re shaking.”

The gentle fingertips combed over her scalp. “I’m nervous,” Mary Eunice admitted. “But I like this. Being with you like this.” Lana kissed her shoulder. “I love being close to you. And, um… Being--Being naked.” Lana bit her shoulder, a tender nip, like a puppy gauging how hard it could chew on its mother’s tail. “Ooh!” Mary Eunice cooed the noise in a reflex, her shoulders tensing. All of her nerves lit up with sensation, mapping a path down between her legs. She pinched her thighs together to relieve some of the pressure building up there. “Oh, goodness.” Not this again. The funny feeling, the arousal, stirred at the least opportune times, and she could do nothing to
A hand scooped up over her forehead, trying to keep the suds from streaming into her eyes. “Close your eyes. I don’t want to burn them.” Mary Eunice obeyed. “I like this, too,” Lana said, a soft afterthought. “Don’t be nervous. You’re beautiful.” She squished all of the shampoo into her hair and wrung it out like a sponge, all of the suds flowing between their feet onto the tile floor of the shower and the rubber mat. “Is that what scares you?”

“No, not really.” Mary Eunice leaned her head back into the stream of water to wash the shampoo from her hair, a reflexive hand going to see if any of the soap remained behind. “It’s new. I’ve never even dreamed about this, about you, and I don’t want to mess it up.” She shook the loose droplets from her face and blinked to look up at Lana. “I know you will say I won’t, but it’s still…” Lana nodded in agreement. She dipped Mary Eunice down for a kiss. The hot flesh of her tongue pushed out between her lips, slipping into Mary Eunice’s own mouth. “Mm!” The expected chaste, brief kiss evolved into a game.

Oh, yes! Her nipples pebbled at the stimulation, Lana’s tongue exploring her mouth. She wrapped her mouth around Lana’s tongue and sucked on it. “Hm,” Lana hummed, the corners of her lips opening for her to slurp in a deep breath in the steamy shower. She didn’t draw back, but instead, she wrapped her arms around Mary Eunice’s neck and hooked them there. Is it too much? Her tongue fit so nice in the roof of Mary Eunice’s mouth, like it belonged there, tracing the top spine of her jaw and the scaly texture forming behind her teeth. Mary Eunice nursed upon it until Lana retracted it, Mary Eunice leaning forward to try to chase it. “You won’t mess this up,” Lana murmured to her. The warm water flushed both of their skins a pink shade, disguising the blush rushing to Mary Eunice’s cheeks, but at the sheepish creases forming at the corners of her eyes and lips, Lana asked, “Did you like that?”

Mary Eunice giggled, a tender thing. “Yes.” She reached for the shampoo. Lana’s arms slid from around her neck and planted on her hips instead, sliding up her waist. The tickling sensation made her shudder. Her nipples stood up in spite of the hot temperatures. The roaming hands slid under each breast, tracing the crease where they hung over her chest, circling them in the passage between her breasts. Heat built in the base of her throat, some expression of pleasure she didn’t know how to put to words. “I like it when you touch me.” Her voice had a shaky note to it as Lana circled her areola, no larger than a quarter, with her thumb, making tiny bumps appear on it. With the shampoo in her palms, she smoothed it over the top of Lana’s head, gazing at her brown locks, stained black by the water pouring from the shower faucet, while Lana bent lower to press her lips to the top of each breast. Lana’s hands slipped from her hips and grabbed her ass, a cheek in either hand, and squeezed. Mary Eunice squeaked in surprise. She tangled her fingers in her hair and scraped over her scalp. She scrubbed the shampoo into her locks until it built up into thick, white fluff. The stream of water swept the suds, heavy as cumulus clouds, down toward Lana’s face, and Mary Eunice scrambled to catch them and push them back before the soap could run into her eyes.

Flinging her hair back, Lana lifted her head just long enough for the water to rinse the suds from her hair, but she hadn’t left her mission; free from the flavor of the shampoo poisoning her tongue, she dove onto Mary Eunice's breasts again. Oh, my word. Mary Eunice bit the tip of her tongue to keep from crying out as Lana’s tongue writhed around one of her nipples, the other teased by her hand, the thumb flicking back and forth right over the delicate bud. She gasped for breath, lungs tight, and slurped in a deep breath of water. Chest quivering, harsh coughs ripped from her. The water burned in the bottom of her throat. The first cough stopped Lana, the second making her glance up at Mary Eunice. At the third, she straightened, placing her palms flat against the other’s chest. “Hey, breathe. Breathe. Don’t inhale the water.”

I'm trying! Mary Eunice hacked some more, until the burning in her chest had become a dry

Tossing her head back, Lana laughed, her teeth shining in the light filtering through the steam. “My mistake.” Her hands slid down from Mary Eunice’s heaving chest to cup a breast in each hand. Her nipples stood up, erect against the stimulus. “I wouldn’t dream of doing a thing like that.” She flicked her thumb over Mary Eunice’s tiny nipple. A squeak emerged from her throat. The smirk vanished from Lana’s face, replaced by a serious, tender look. The flirtatiousness was a facade for the pure love borne in her brown eyes. Mary Eunice grinned at her in return, a desperate thing; the heat between her legs ached, pleading for something to take the pressure away, and each time Lana touched her, it grew. Lana’s lips connected to her collarbones again, and this time, she didn't come back up. Mary Eunice bent forward, keeping her face out of the stream of water. She braced one hand on Lana’s shoulder, the other flat against the wall of the shower.

The sucking and nipping at her breasts continued, Lana humming with satisfaction whenever Mary Eunice made a noise in response to her ministrations, soft grunts and half-moans and croaks of approval and the occasional quiet, “Lana, please.” Lana left her chest, arms hooking around Mary Eunice’s body as she dropped to her knees, smattering the ticklish expanse of her lover’s belly with kisses and nibbles and hard sucks. A giggle emerged with each scrape of Lana’s teeth against her squishy abdomen. Her sides quivered with the restrained laughter. Lana reached her navel and kissed it, dipping her tongue inside. “Ooh!” Mary Eunice yelped in surprise. Her groin pulsed with need, breasts refusing to settle. Her nipples stared up at the ceiling, erect and seeking stimulus.

Lana’s arms slid down, tightening behind her knees to support her. She kissed and sucked on the tender, ticklish flesh beneath her navel. Following the trail of her hair from her belly button down to her pubic mound, Lana kissed the top of her mound, easing her face into Mary Eunice’s garden. Mary Eunice leaned her head back. *Oh my, it burns.* The need weakened her knees. *Oh, I can’t!* Frustration bubbled, hot as a pot of boiling water, in the pit of her stomach. Lana's nose halted just where her labia parted, pressed there and inhaling the heady aroma of her arousal. Her legs had separated at some point, making enough room for Lana to squeeze them. But Lana didn't press her. She nuzzled her way back up Mary Eunice's lower body, sliding over to her bruised inner thighs. “You smell so good.” Her hands roamed up and down Mary Eunice's legs, rubbing the hair up one way and down the other. “I want to taste you.”

*Taste me.* Mary Eunice gulped. She had never felt so hot before, hot between the legs, her most intimate parts swollen and sensitive. “Lana…” She wriggled, trying to close her legs. Lana released her without a struggle. “I can’t.” Her heart smoldered. *I could, I could do it right now. I wish I were so daring. God, forgive me.* She had promised her chastity to the Lord, and she could not go back on it now. The Monsignor had taken her virginity from her–or she had taken it from herself, in some twisted sense–but she had confessed to that sin, and she would not replicate it. *I'm afraid.* How did sex feel? She shivered at the thought. Wendy's journal had described it as an act so immensely pleasurable, she couldn't help but cry out, as if in pain. Rachel had touched her when she didn't want the touch and stimulated the place inside her vulva which now threatened to explode if she didn't find a way to relieve the pressure there.

Pulling herself up on Mary Eunice's hips, Lana straightened, her knees popping from having rested on them on the unforgiving floor. “I know, I know.” Mary Eunice wriggled, a whine building in her throat. “I feel it, too.”

Her toes curled. “I don't like it.” She screwed up her face to try to ignore the pulse between her legs. “How do I make it go away?”

“It will fade. Just ignore it.” Lana pecked a kiss onto her lips and rubbed soap into a washcloth.
She placed it on Mary Eunice's shoulders and rubbed. “Think of something uncomfortable.”

“Like what?”

Lana shrugged. “Most people use a family member. A grandmother. Try Father Joseph.” Mary Eunice cringed. Lana laughed. “There, that's the face I was looking for!” She rubbed down Mary Eunice's arms and lifted each one to scrub beneath them. “I'm sorry. I got carried away.”

“It felt good. Until it stopped.”

“I know. I shouldn't have done it.” The washcloth traveled over her breasts, between them, and slipped over the smooth planes of her back; Mary Eunice turned around at Lana's prompting. “You've got a mole back here.” Lana flicked her thumb over the protruding bit of dark skin. “Have you always had it?”

Mary Eunice nodded. “Since I was a baby. It used to get sore, but it hasn't in years.” Lana pinched it. “Ow! What was that for?”

“Sorry, sorry.” Lana rubbed the pad of her finger over the mole again. “Sometimes they can become cancerous. Melanoma. My grandmother had it.”

“It's just a birthmark.”

“Will you tell me if it starts hurting again?”

“It's hurting right now. You just pinched it.” Lana swatted her on the bum with a gentle hand, mashing the squishy lump of one cheek in her palm. Oh, God help me. All of the heat rushed back to Mary Eunice's face where she had just managed to banish it, taking her mind off of the horrible snake of arousal slithering from the pit of her stomach all the way down into her vulva, more wet from her own sticky fluids than the hot water showering down on them. “Lana.”

She relinquished the buttcheek and slid the washcloth down to her ass and massaged it in an apology. “Sorry. It’s just so… pretty.” Do you think so? Mary Eunice knew she had scars on her rear from the lashings she'd received from Sister Jude's cane. Lana traced the heavy white ripples with her fingertips. “Does this bother you?”

Mary Eunice shook her head. “I like it.” At her answer, Lana squeezed one buttcheek again. “I--I really like it.” Her hips bent backward on reflex into Lana's touch. “I like the way you touch me.”

Lana rubbed the soapy washcloth in the crack of her ass. She bent over to wring out the cloth over her legs and feet, scrubbing them. “I like touching you.” She scraped her teeth in a light graze over Mary Eunice's thigh. Each touch made electricity crackle through her veins, hot and bright, illuminated and lustful by her lover’s attention to her body. “Turn around.” Gladly. Mary Eunice obeyed, and Lana followed with the washcloth back up her front. “So you want spaghetti for dinner?”

“If that’s what you want.”

“That’s what you said earlier.”

“I can make anything.”

“Spaghetti is fast. I want to eat and have some time to watch Bonanza.”

Mary Eunice grinned. “Alright. Spaghetti it is.” Her hands, hanging limp and useless at her sides, reached and caught Lana by the curve of her hip bones, thumbs trailing the purple stretch marks
there. Her eyes drank in the sight of Lana again, this time clouded by the steam in the air, the water gradually losing its heat from the amount of time they’d spent beneath the faucet. Hand sliding up Lana’s torso, the muscles and flesh twitching in response, she cupped the underside of one of Lana’s brown-stained breasts. Her chest hitched with a sudden breath. “Is this okay?”

Lana nodded, but the lines around her eyes deepened, and she didn’t make eye contact, gaze slanted down to the floor of the shower. *Everything we’ve done has been her touching me.* Mary Eunice leaned forward to peck a kiss onto her lips, hand falling away from her chest. *She can touch me all she likes. I won’t hurt her.* “I want to wash you now.” She slid the washcloth from Lana’s hand and filled it with soap again, scrubbing it into a white fluff and distributing it over her neck and shoulders. “You’re so beautiful.” Smoothing the soap over her arms, Mary Eunice connected the dots with her eyes, finding shapes hidden in Lana’s tiny freckles, constellations in her stars. “I love you.”

Big brown eyes lifted from the ground and found hers again, swimming with tears but not weeping. “Thank you.” *For what? For not scaring you? For not hurting you?* Mary Eunice blinked, taken aback. Had Lana expected anything less from her? She pressed closer in the intimate space of the shower, close enough for Mary Eunice to wash her back, exploring her body without much consideration to her movements; Lana’s proximity took all of her focus.

Hesitant arms folded around the back of her neck and caught there in a quiet embrace, their bare fronts squishing together in the cooling water raining down on them. Lana rested her chin on her shoulder, and Mary Eunice reciprocated, nose pressing into her girlfriend’s brunette hair. “I could never hurt you,” she whispered. “I only want to take what you can give me--no more, nothing else.” They rocked back and forth, swaying as if to the beat of a song. When Mary Eunice closed her eyes, she imagined they rested below a waterfall in a spring oasis, surrounded by bright green flora and animals darting about around them. *In Eden. Just like I dreamed.* She never could have fathomed her dream would become reality, arms around Lana’s nude body, grazing her short fingernails over her back to comfort her. *Molly used to love to have her back scratched.*

Just as she thought it, Lana keened a satisfied whine at her ministrations. “I love you, too, Mary Eunice.” *I never thought she would call me that.* Lana kissed the pulse point on her neck. “Forever.” She fumbled with the ring on the necklace around Mary Eunice’s neck. *Forever sounds good to me.* Mary Eunice smiled, holding her all the tighter beneath the cold shower. Gooseflesh emerged all over her body, and she kept her back to the stream, protecting Lana from the chill just as she had in the bottom of the creek. Here, she had no fear of the cold hurting her, but she wanted to share as much of her own warmth as she could with Lana so they could linger just a little longer in their loving embrace.
Exiting the church in the flow of people, Lana flanked Mary Eunice, gazing up at the darkening evening sky. “So—what exactly is the purpose of what you just did?” she asked as she unlocked the doors of the car.

February had warmed the earth just enough to melt the snow, but frost still clung to the grass, and Lana wore all of the things Mary Eunice had gotten her for Christmas, hands burrowed deep in the pale blue gloves, hair tucked into her knit cap, sweater snug around her middle, green and yellow scarf wrapped around her neck.

“It’s Ash Wednesday,” Mary Eunice said, folding herself into the car. “It’s the beginning of Lent.” She played with the buttons of her newly sewn habit. Glancing out of the car window, she tugged her hair out of its comb and released it from its veil. She slid the buttons out of their holes one by one, a purse of concentration on her lips; she handled her new habit with the utmost care, having slaved over it almost nonstop since Lana had given her the material. Taking her arms from the sleeves, she folded it in her lap at the creases, brushing the dusty layer of ashes from its front.

Lana sank into the seat beside her and cranked up the car, flicking on the heater. “I’ll need a little bit more than that.” Mary Eunice glanced at her sideways, lips quirked in confusion. “I’m a Baptist. We don’t do Lent.” Lana gesticulated vaguely in the air, like she could touch the concept of Lent and point out the exact places it confused her. “None of this Easter stuff is a big deal for us. Will you explain it to me? The significance?”

Humming in response, Mary Eunice nibbled on her lower lip. Dark circles marked the undersides of her eyes. She hasn’t been sleeping well.

Shifting the gears of the car, Lana pulled out into the street. The church was more crowded than usual, bright headlights beaming into her windshield at the darkening twilight hour. “What’s the deal with the ashes, then?”

Mary Eunice touched the dark cross slashed on her face on reflex. “Ashes are a symbol of grief and repentance in the Bible. They burn the palm leaves from last year’s Palm Sunday—the Sunday before Easter—so they don’t go to waste. It’s to accompany the Latin blessing—Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris.” Her hand fluttered away from the mark and settled in her lap again. Her voice was muted, but her eyes glowed with enthusiasm, her lips curled up at the corners. “Remember, man, that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return.”

“Joyful,” Lana remarked in a dry voice, and Mary Eunice giggled. “Am I allowed to wipe that dirt off of you, or do you have to leave it in place?”

“I’m not supposed to touch it. It’ll come off next time I shower.”

“Alright.” Lana nodded in agreement, though she didn't particularly understand. Her fingers...
drummed on the steering wheel. Mary Eunice stifled a yawn behind the palm of her hand. *She's beaten down. She didn't even tell me what last night's dream was about.* Lana had woken to her shivering in a cold sweat, trying to muffle her own whimpers to avoid disturbing the bed; she hadn't wept, though Lana wrapped her in a tight embrace and rocked her until she drifted back off to sleep. “How about we go get dinner? You don't have to cook tonight. We could call it our first real date.”

A tender smile touched Mary Eunice's lips, but she shook her head, much to Lana's surprise. “I can't. Today is a day of fasting. I only drink water from sunup to sundown.”

Lana swerved at the vow. “You *what?* That's not healthy! That can't be normal—for *forty days*?”

“No—no, of course not. On Ash Wednesday and every Friday preceding Easter. The canon rules involve small meals and no meat, but we all practiced the same way at Briarcliff. Sister Jude said it counted as our independent fast, because we didn't have much else to give up.” She gave an awkward half-smirk. “Sister Charity insisted it was because one year, Sister Aloysius tried to give up *bathing* and the whole sanitarium nearly lost its nose in exchange.”

Lana choked. “That's—That's gross. As grubby as that place is. She had to have mold in her armpits.”

“You know she did.” Face flushing, Mary Eunice averted her eyes, mumbling something incoherent in response. “I hate to think all of the nasty stuff that grew on her from that.” She glanced sideways at Mary Eunice again, evaluating her, the pallor to her cheeks and the slight tremble in her hands. “You ate breakfast, didn’t you?”

“No. I got up too late.”

“But you were in the kitchen. You cooked.” Lana pursed her lips, struggling to remember. She had gotten straight to editing that morning, and every morning preceding; she had slashed and marked her way through the first half of her book and started typing up the finished products of each chapter, eating away at her time to reach the deadline. Her publisher wanted the final manuscript by the first of March to review it and start printing. *I might’ve bitten off more than I can chew by promising it so soon.* But since September, since the first night when Mary Eunice had fallen asleep and wrapped Lana in her tight embrace, writing was easier. Remembering was easier. If it overwhelmed her, she could stand up and walk away and find a familiar face. She trusted Mary Eunice to offer any support Lana could fathom, usually in the form of a tight squeeze and a series of breathless kisses, though there were times when she couldn’t accept that, and instead she held her hand and leaned back, taking herself to a happier place. Clearing her throat, she said, “You had a plate, didn’t you? You had—You had eggs. Scrambled. And you tried to eat those grits.” The memory was fuzzy. Her days were bleeding together. *I can’t wait until I’ve finished.*

Mary Eunice shook her head. “No, that was yesterday. This morning, I made you biscuits and sausage gravy. You didn’t have any coffee.” Lana’s brow quirked in the middle of her forehead. “Do you remember? You spilled orange juice on your copy of chapter thirteen.”

Touching her temple, Lana nodded. “Yeah, I remember that—I don’t remember anything else.” *I don’t remember eating breakfast at all.* She exhaled and fanned her own breath up to her nose, smelling it. *Definitely sausage.* “I’m sorry. I’m really an ungrateful wretch, aren’t I? You ought to swat me with a newspaper when I’m like that. Make me pay some attention to the world around me.”
Chuckling, Mary Eunice placed a light hand on her thigh. “You get in the zone. I can’t interrupt your focus. Yesterday, when I brought you your lunch, you were berating a semicolon.”

“You were in there? You heard that?”

“I brought you your lunch. Did you think it magically appeared?”

*Maybe.* Lana sucked on the inside of her cheek. She remembered stuffing the sandwich into her mouth with her clumsy left hand while slashing with her red pen in her right. The mayonnaise had leaked all over her desk, and she’d cursed at herself aloud for making the greasy mess. *But it was gone when I got out of the shower.* She hadn’t realized it until now, that the nasty film of mayonnaise on her desk was gone when she’d returned to keep at her craft. *I’m not doing that anymore. Her cleaning up my messes without me noticing—that’s not going to happen anymore.* “Don’t bring me meals anymore,” she said instead.

The fond, teasing smile fell from Mary Eunice’s lips, making an O of dismay. “Why? I don’t mind, Lana. I don’t want you to have to interrupt your work.”

She set her jaw. “It’s rude. I need to come out of my hole and spend some time with you. You’re not my maid.” She had said those words before, months ago, when Mary Eunice first took up cleaning the house, and Lana was overwhelmed by a woman who kept the home so spotless.

The hand on her thigh brushed down to her knee, stopping where the hem of her skirt ended. “I’m not your maid,” she agreed. “You never interrupt when I pray. It’s not fair for me to interrupt your work. And you need to eat. You’re like a hibernating animal in there.”

“You don’t pray for more than eight hours every day.”

“I spend more time praying than you think.” *What?* Lana glanced to her as she headed up the driveway. “Sister Jude taught us to pray while we worked. She told us to keep a conversation with God in our minds all the time to keep us company. It wasn’t uncommon for any of us to talk to God from the moment we woke up until we went to sleep. Prayer isn’t always on your knees at the foot of the altar. Sometimes it happens when you’re in the bathroom and you realize the roll of toilet paper is almost empty and you just need enough sheets to make it through so you can refill it when you’re done.”

Lana shifted the car into park, laughing a quiet thing at Mary Eunice’s analogy. *That would definitely be the most appropriate time to pray.* But she sent her girlfriend a tender look, neither of them yet reaching for the handles on their doors. “Do you still do that?” she asked. Mary Eunice blinked to her in surprise, questioning what she meant. “Pray all the time, I mean.”

Mary Eunice shrugged, sort of shaking her head and nodding at the same time. “Not as much as I used to,” she admitted. “I don’t think of it as much, anymore. I don’t narrate everything I’m doing in my head. I used to find it easy to pray—unique prayers, real prayers—but now I struggle. I pray my rosary during the day, rather than anything else.” She averted her eyes, as if shamed, and Lana frowned, wondering if she had proposed a troubling question. “I told Father Joseph. He says it’s because I learned to rely on God as my only friend, so I went to Him with all of the things a normal person would discuss with a friend—what I now share with you. So I don’t have as much need to tell every little thing in prayer.”

Troubles creased the corners of her lips and her eyes. *This is bothering her.* Confusion tittered in the pit of her stomach. Was it a bad thing for Mary Eunice to trust her with all of the things she had once given to God? *She’s a nun. Of course it’s bad for anyone to replace God in her life.* “You still write in your prayer journal every night,” Lana reminded her, a gentle thing. “I think you’re doing enough.”
Mary Eunice’s crystalline eyes met hers, a sorrowful form of wisdom written there. For all of her girlfriend’s naivete, she knew the trials of faith better than anyone. *I see more God in her eyes than I have ever seen in any church.* The holiness in her gaze made Lana purer just by looking into them, calmed her broken spirit, cooled the flame inside of her. But it didn’t aid Mary Eunice or her struggles with her faith. The overwhelming beauty and trust within her eyes, trust which she gave both to Lana and to God, held a certain emptiness now, a void. *I hardly ever see that, except when she has nightmares.* “It isn’t about what I do.” Mary Eunice squeezed her hand tight, all of her love bleeding across her face. “It’s about how I feel. The feeling of God in my heart is gone. It has been for months now—I get flashes of it, echoes, but it’s not… It’s just not the same as it was, before.”

*Her spirit is broken.* Lana tucked a lock of blonde hair behind her ear, her fingertips skimming Mary Eunice’s skin. “I thought you were getting better.” Lana had never known the elation accompanying church, the high of faith and glory which so many people rode; church had always held more danger for her than promise, and the heaven everyone imagined had no place for her. “You always act like…” She drifted off, uncertain how to continue. *Everything about you is veiled in faith. How can you feel nothing for it?*

The pad of her thumb trailed over the back of Lana’s knuckles. “I act. That’s it. I remember how I used to feel, and I—I perform the same way, and I pray, but…” She clicked her tongue in the back of her mouth, sticking in the heavy saliva. “I feel empty. My heart. Void of the place God used to be. I’m full in places I’ve never felt happy before, but it’s—it’s not the same. That I can pray for hours and feel no comfort in it but the repetition. That’s it’s—it’s more of a comfortable habit, now, than something holy.” She shook her head, a wry thing. “When you were in the hospital, I prayed so much, and it was like—like I was hollow. It all echoed inside of me. It’s hard to explain, but I used to have this—this mailbox in my chest where I put all of my letters to God, and He was in my heart, so He would read them all, and sometimes He would write back and sometimes He didn’t have time but I still knew He had read them. And I haven’t gotten the feeling of the mailbox being opened—” Mary Eunice cut herself off abruptly. “You’re giving me a really weird look. The mailbox doesn’t make any sense, does it?”

A tiny grin crossed Lana’s lips. She touched Mary Eunice’s cheek, caressing it with the pad of her thumb. “It doesn’t.” *But it hurts you, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I can’t fix it.* Those azure eyes softened. “I’m sorry, though. I—I’ve never felt what you’ve felt, about God, but I know how important it is to you.”

Mary Eunice sighed, nodding her head in agreement. “I don’t mean to ramble—”

“You don’t. I care what you have to say.” The inside of the car had grown cold—it had rested in the driveway turned off for so long while they talked, apparently forgetting themselves in the midst of their conversation—and Gus’s barks echoed from inside the house, venting his frustration that they hadn’t yet entered. “Do you want to start reading?” she offered, hoping the distraction would brighten Mary Eunice’s eyes. At the provision, just as she expected, the blue eyes lightened. “The first few chapters are done—I’ve finished them. If you still want to.”

“Yes!” Lana laughed at her enthusiasm. “Don’t laugh at me. You’re the most exciting part of my life.”

“How funny. I think you’re the most exciting part of mine.”

“Oh, please!”

The shadow had faded, and they unfolded themselves from the car and headed into house, stripping themselves of their heavy winter layers while they embraced, kissing as soon as they had
closed the door behind them. *I want to take everything off of her.* Lana severed from the kiss before she could cave to the temptation. “I’ll cook my own dinner,” she said, “so you don’t have to be around food.” She could think of nothing more irritating than cooking food and knowing she couldn’t eat it. “Alright?”

Mary Eunice swung upward and pecked her on the lips again, nodding her head in eager agreement with Lana’s postulation. “Can I start reading now?”

Lana grinned. “I opened a can of worms, didn’t I?” But she guided Mary Eunice by the wrist, tugging her into the office, where she had organized her manuscript in manila folders, each one marked by the number of the chapter, the whole shelf labeled *Maniac,* the working title she had chosen. “Here. I numbered the pages.” Lana stacked them in Mary Eunice’s arms. “You’ve got the first five chapters. That should keep you busy for awhile, right?” Mary Eunice nodded in enthusiastic agreement. Lana kissed the tip of her nose.

The day passed by with ease for them; Mary Eunice spent the rest of the afternoon sipping the glass of water she was allowed and reading the pages. Lana gave her a pen and some sticky notes to mark if she had any questions, but she left them untouched beside her on the couch, her lip between her teeth and toes curling in her cushions, fingers drumming on the arm of the couch as she continued through the pages. Lana, meanwhile, spent her time in the office, typing up the revised chapter she had finished. By the time night fell, she filled her belly with a sandwich and milk—she didn’t want to cook anything that would create a scent—and retired to bed after a quick shower. “Sister?” she called as she flicked on her bedside lamp. “Are you coming to bed?”

“Yes—I’m coming.” Mary Eunice stopped in the hallway to turn down the furnace. She placed the stack of folders on the nightstand, but she didn’t crawl into bed beside Lana. Instead, she went to the hall closet and tugged out the extra blankets, dropping them into the floor, and put her pillow in the floor on top of them.

Lana rolled over, peeking over the side of the bed at her. “What in the hell are you doing?” she asked, eyes narrow at her girlfriend where she sprawled out on the pallet in the floor. “There’s a whole half-a-bed up here for you, you know. It has your name on it.” She patted the side of the bed, like encouraging a shy dog to join her up on the mattress.

Mary Eunice chuckled, sitting down on top of the pallet she arranged and flipping through the packet of papers to get to where she had stopped reading underneath the lamplight. “Don’t be silly, Lana. It’s Lent. I’m giving up the bed as a personal sacrifice.” She folded down a page to indicate where she had stopped reading. “At Briarcliff, Sister Jude didn’t like us to make personal sacrifices—like I said, about Sister Aloysius and bathing. I still tried to find things, but I always preferred to give up the bed. It made me feel more humble, I suppose.”

“But you already gave up food.” Mary Eunice shrugged, and Lana pursed her lips, irritated her little plea didn’t break through to her. “But we sleep together,” she tried again, this time imploring her girlfriend for a little mercy. But Mary Eunice didn’t waver; she flicked through the papers, ignoring Lana altogether. *Don’t whine. It’s her faith.* Lana puffed a frustrated from her nose, nonetheless, and then she pulled the blankets back off the bed, stripping it down to its bare bones.

Mary Eunice glanced up at her. “Lana?”

Throwing all of the bed materials in the floor, Lana dropped her pillow beside Mary Eunice. “I’m blaming you for my sore back.” Folding herself down beside her girlfriend, she curled up with her knees wrapped around her lover’s legs. Mary Eunice placed a warm arm around her shoulders, tugging her close. Lana planted a warm kiss to her cheek. “I love you,” she said, softer than the rest of her words, more tender. “Even when your quirky faith makes me sleep in the floor.”
“You don’t have to sleep in the floor, Lana. I don’t expect it.” Mary Eunice turned her head to gaze into Lana’s brown eyes, hot as a mug of steaming chocolate, and she leaned forward to kiss her pink lips. “I love you, too.”

Lana caught a stray lock of blonde hair hanging around her eyes and tucked it behind her ear to clear her face. “No, I don’t have to. I want to. I want to be with you all the time.” She rested her cheek on Mary Eunice’s chest, not caring that she made it hard for Mary Eunice to turn the pages of her story. “Sleeping in the floor isn’t that bad, anyway. I can think of worse places.” Her eyes drowsed, half-open, as Gus jumped off of the bed and joined them in the floor, lying on their lump of blankets like a mat. “Did you do this at Briarcliff? Even though she didn’t want you to?”

Lips pressed into the top of her head, and her belly caught fire at the gentle touch. “I tried my first year. But… Well, Lent starts in February, and my chamber had a broken window, I…” She drifted off, shrugging, and the movement made Lana open her eyes again to blink up at her. “I got really sick,” Mary Eunice admitted quietly. “Really sick. It started as a cough, but things were never all that sanitized, and the flu was going around, so I was spending time bouncing between the kitchens and the infirmary to help Dr. Arden. First just the cough, and then the fever, and then the dizziness and the confusion. I kept waiting to get over it, like normal, because we weren’t really supposed to take the medication away from the patients if we could help it.”

“Like what you did here.” Mary Eunice nodded. But I was here when she got sick. I cared. Nobody there cared about her. “What happened?” Lana asked, quiet and concerned, a wrinkle appearing between her eyebrows.

Dog-earring the page of the story again, Mary Eunice took her gaze away from the place where she had stopped mid-sentence. “Sister Jude caught me. Well, that happened first. She caught me trying to knead the biscuits I’d just baked with a rolling pin, and she took me back to my chamber, and that was where she found my blanket on the cold floor right under the broken window. She told me she would cane me if I hadn’t already put myself half in the grave and put me to bed in her chamber. I don’t—I don’t remember what happened, really, after that. Pepper tried to explain it, the best she could.” Mary Eunice nibbled on her lower lip in deep thought. “Pepper found me. I’d gotten confused in my sleep and passed out in the hallway. She found me, all blue and everything, and started screaming—that’s all I remember, really, the sound of her screaming for Sister Jude to come help. And Jude came, and she—somehow, she picked me up, and she carried me all the way to the infirmary. Called Dr. Arden in from his house. She wanted his car to take me to the hospital, but he wouldn’t let her. He took X-rays of my chest and found a bunch of pneumonia, so he plugged me up on oxygen and put me on a saline drip and gave me antibiotics. I missed Easter Mass and everything. I was so embarrassed.”

“But she still didn’t get your window fixed?”

Mary Eunice shook her head. “She tried, she brought it up to the Monsignor several times. He kept saying he would fix it and then blowing her off. After that year, she let us share chambers in the winter, because I wasn’t the only one with a broken window, and we didn’t have enough blankets to go around, anyway.” She smiled in spite of herself. “Sister Jude was a good sleep partner. One time, she was out of town with the Monsignor, and I had to share with Sister Aloysius, and she snored right in my ear all night long.”

Lana cackled. “I can’t believe you! You had to share a bed with Jude? And with some other farting old coot?”

“Hey! Sister Aloysius was fine, except for the snoring and the smell.”

Lana snuggled deep against her, stringing an arm around her middle and resting her face in the crook of Mary Eunice’s neck. “I’m glad I get to sleep with you now, instead of any of them. This
February, I get you.” Mary Eunice hugged her tight. “Is this okay? Am I smothering you?”

“I’m fine. I like this.” Through the sheer fabric of her nightgown, Mary Eunice’s nipples pebbled, pressing against Lana’s chest. “I like it a lot.” She shifted the papers on top of Lana’s back so she could read them while Lana rested. “Do you mind the light? I can wait to keep reading until tomorrow.”

“The light is fine,” Lana replied. “But… Don’t read past chapter four, okay? I don’t want to give you more nightmares.”

“Mhm.”

An ear pressed to her girlfriend’s chest, the consistent bass beat of her heart and the whistle of air into and out of her lungs eased Lana into a quick and peaceful sleep, long before Mary Eunice put aside the story and turned off the light to officially retire for the night.

…

Adjusting her coif and veil around her face, Mary Eunice strode into the cathedral to meet Father Joseph, leaving Lana reading in the parking lot, soaking in the warm sun filtering in through the windows of the car. At the altar, she spotted him, kneeling, and she tiptoed down the aisle, waiting for him to rise before drawing any nearer. At the sound of the large wooden doors slamming shut, he roused, standing and turning to face her, but heavy troubles rested under his eyes and in the corners of his eyes. “Sister Mary Eunice,” he greeted, offering a hand. She placed her small hand in his large one, letting his squeezing grasp swallow her pale fingers. The scent of coffee clung to him. “It’s good to see you this week.”

“Are you alright, Father? You look ill.”

A smile creasing his face, Father Joseph shook his head. “I’m always alarmed by how much you observe, Sister, and what empathy that grants you.” She tilted her head, withdrawing her hand as he released it. “No, I’m not alright. I’ve heard some troubling news that I must share with you.” Clearing his throat, he turned away, beckoning her toward the back of the church, into the office where they always met. “But I wish to hear about you, first. My obligation to you is the same as before.”

What sort of news? Mary Eunice wanted to demand it from him, wanted to stomp her foot and cross her arms and pout like a toddler and pitch a fit, none of it paralleling the panic in the pit of her stomach. “Father?” she whispered, but he tossed his notes and books onto the coffee table before sinking into the same chair he always occupied, and she had no choice but to sit opposite him, like usual. “I… I’m well, I suppose. Or, rather, I was, about three minutes ago.”

A slight smile cracked his face. “Don’t let me bother you, Sister. Tell me about your week. What about your dreams? Are they improving with our meditation and prayer techniques?” Mary Eunice bit back a sigh, but at the sight of her face, Father Joseph recognized her frustration. He clicked his tongue in shame, taking note of it in the notebook. “Not yet, then. I trust that you’re practicing the techniques seriously—you’re not the type to shirk.” Nodding, Mary Eunice averted her eyes, ashamed of herself. “Have the dreams changed recently? I know you said they’ve gotten worse since you visited Lana’s family over Christmas. But has the content changed?”

Mary Eunice cleared her throat. “Somewhat,” she whispered. Eyes downcast, she stared at the toes of his shoes. “Before, I had flashback dreams more than anything else. And those are still most common, memories that I can’t remember otherwise, but… I’ve had dreams about justice, and vengeance, and using—using my evil powers to—to protect myself, those I have a lot, and dreams unrelated to that at all, where I’m helpless and people want to hurt me or Lana and I can’t do
anything to stop them.” Worry stirred in the pit of her stomach. *I don’t want to talk about this. I want to know what’s wrong.* She drummed her fingers on the arms of the oversize chair which had become her companion through these therapeutic sessions. “It scares me when I wake up wishing I was still strong. That scares me more than any memory, that some part of me wants—wants to be strong again, knowing how unholy that power is.”

Father Joseph nodded and hummed, taking note of it in his notebook. “I understand.”

“Is this normal, Father?”

He cleared his throat. *Oh, no, it isn’t normal.* Mary Eunice’s belly flipped. “I can’t say I’ve encountered it before, no. But you have unique circumstances, Sister. People have sought to hurt you, and you don’t have the means to defend yourself. It makes sense to me that your subconscious envies a power which protected you, even if it harmed you at the same time.”

Raising his eyes to her, he arched a brow. “Do you mind if I ask who usually appears in these dreams? The ones where you defend yourself from people who have wronged you, or who seek to hurt you?”

Mary Eunice closed her eyes and swallowed hard, a lump budding in her throat. “The first time,” she whispered, “it was the man in the restaurant. The man who attacked me and Lana when we tried to eat lunch. I dreamed I…” Her stomach backflipped, and she paused to gulp down the bile in her throat. “I dreamed I cut him up alive.” Father Joseph’s expression betrayed nothing, only a slow nod following from him, complete understanding; he never passed judgment on her, and Mary Eunice thanked all of the stars in heaven for his graciousness. “That was only once. It was sometime in October. But, after Christmas, they’ve gotten much worse. I’ve dreamed about the man who—who tried to violate me, in the church bathroom. I dream of castrating him.”

Her fingers curled up into the fabric of her habit. “I’ve dreamed of him several times, three or four times, since we came home. And I’ve dreamed of Fred Peyser, the man who threatened to kill Lana for going to see her father. Twisting his rifle back, so the barrel points into his mouth, and making him pull the trigger. I’ve seen him several times, too.”

“Are those the only ones you see? Men who hurt you, or who tried to?”

“They are the dreams that follow the script, yes, where I cut down other people.”

“So are there dreams that don’t follow the script?”

Father Joseph leaned forward to peer at her, pushing his glasses farther up on his nose, and at his interest, Mary Eunice lifted her head, fighting to look him in the eyes. “Yes,” she mumbled. “I—I dream of Bloody Face, and he doesn’t follow the script. I see him in the basement with Lana… on top of her.” A shudder passed through her, and goosebumps ripped across the surface of her skin. “Raping her. And I go down the stairs and pull him off of her, and throw him across the room, but then he—he just floats back up, and his eyes turn all red, and I realize that he’s possessed, too. And we fight, we always fight, but he’s bigger than me, and it doesn’t matter what I do—he always wins. He pins me down by the throat, and then he sucks all of the power out of me. Like draining a battery. He just drinks it out of me, no matter how I try to thrash or get him off, and I can see Lana out of the corner of my eye, but there’s nothing I can do to save her or myself—”

Mary Eunice broke off in a hiccup, unfolding the handkerchief from her pocket and dabbing at the corners of her eyes and lips. *I’m sorry.* She didn’t apologize; Father Joseph told her not to apologize for her tears in his session. But she couldn’t weed the urge to apologize out of herself. “I always wake up screaming. The first time, it scared Lana so badly, she fell out of bed.”

Father Joseph offered her a reassuring smile, but the darkness lingered in the shadows of his face and the corners of his eyes. “How many times have you had this dream? This one in particular?”
Biting her lower lip, Mary Eunice shrugged. “At least five times. Maybe more, I… I don’t really know.”

He placed a box of tissues on the center table, but Mary Eunice didn’t take one. “I know you like to talk to Lana about the things you experience here. And I agree a secular perspective might aid you in overcoming certain hardships associated with recovering from possession. Have you talked to her about this dream?”

Mary Eunice shook her head. “No, Father, I—I never tell her when I dream of Bloody Face. It upsets her. She tries to comfort me, she does, but—he is her demon. He haunts her sleep more often than he haunts mine.” Hesitating, she asked after a short pause, “Do you think I should? Talk to her about him? And the dreams? Do you think it would help?”

“It may help, but if you fear it would upset her, that is your decision to make, Sister. I won’t ask you to open up her wounds for your own benefit.” Mary Eunice nodded, long and slow. “I won’t.”

She knew Lana would want to hear about the dreams, even if they would hurt her, but Mary Eunice had held Lana through too many nightmares to risk giving her more. “I do think it’s wise for you to tell her about the dreams which don’t involve Bloody Face. Do you still do that?” Mary Eunice nodded in quick affirmation. “Good. I think that’s healthy for you to have an intimate friend’s support.” Friend. The word burned in Mary Eunice’s mind. She couldn’t tell Father Joseph about the new level of unity she and Lana had found; he called Lana an affliction whenever her sexuality came into the conversation. “What about your other dreams? You mentioned dreams where you feel powerless. What are those?”

She curled her toes inside her shoes. “I have dreams about being abused,” she murmured, toying with the corner of her handkerchief. “Usually it’s Sister Jude or the Monsignor or Dr. Arden, from Briarcliff. Sometimes I see Bloody Face then, too. They’re always in control. Usually I’m—I’m tied up, or I’m strapped down. I can’t get away. And they tell me how they’re going to hurt me or Lana, and nothing I say or do will stop them. Sometimes they bring Lana to me, to make me watch them hurt her.”

“Do you worry about Lana being hurt? In real life, outside of your dreams?”

“It’s my biggest fear,” Mary Eunice admitted in a whisper. “Everywhere we go, I—I see people look at her. That evil look. Even if they don’t say anything, they look, and that hurts me. It hurts me that I love her so much, and no one else sees how wonderful she is. And it frightens me that someone could just—just decide to hurt her, and I might not be able to do anything to stop it.” She blew her nose into her handkerchief, trying to look into Father Joseph’s eyes. “I can’t imagine my life without Lana. She hates when I try to defend her, she hates it. She says she’s afraid I would be hurt if I tried to help her.”

“She’s experienced a lot of loss. It’s understandable that she doesn’t want anyone else to be hurt on her account.”

“But if I were with her, and someone hurt her—I would never forgive myself.”

“She probably thinks the same way about you.” Father Joseph’s tender smile, rueful and fatherly in the same stroke, expanded on his face. “You two are lucky to have one another. Many people go their whole lives without knowing a loyal friendship. Love her, Sister, and support her, and let her do the same for you. And keep praying. Keep meditating.” He closed his notebook, grating his jaw. “I hate to cut us short today, but I feel the news I must share with you eating me away inside.”

Mary Eunice braced herself. “I—I don’t understand, Father.”
He sighed, leaning back in his rolling chair. “I told you that when you went missing over Christmas, I tried to reach out to your Monsignor in an attempt to find you?” Mary Eunice nodded in agreement; she had apologized for her disappearance when she returned to him. “And I couldn’t reach him, at that time. I left messages at several locations for him to contact me as soon as possible. And, yesterday, he did.”

Her lower lip trembled. *Oh, no*. No one had heard from the Monsignor in months, but she had hoped—prayed—his silence meant he had forgiven her and was giving her peace and time to recover from her ordeal. “Does he want me defrocked?”

Father Joseph held up a hand, shaking his head. “No, no, I assured him you had returned to the area and were safe. We didn’t talk about you at all.” Her heart flipped, half out of joy, half out of anticipation. “Because I was in contact with him, and I hadn’t been for several months, I asked him about the whereabouts of Mother Claudia and Sister Jude. I knew you were anxious to know what had happened to them.”

“As they okay?” Mary Eunice’s voice cracked.

He paused. *Oh, no, no, no.* “Mother Claudia is fine,” he murmured after a pause. “The church assigned her to a mission field in Brazil. She’s working with disadvantaged children there to try and distribute vaccines.”

Her throat closed up. “But—Sister Jude, Lana told me she was supposed to be restored to her position as head of Briarcliff, she said that was what the Monsignor promised her, and then we couldn’t find her at Briarcliff, but—” Vision blurred and pixelated with tears, Mary Eunice cut herself off, pressing her hands over her nose. “Where is she?”

Father Joseph rolled his chair across the floor toward her and leaned forward, taking her small hands in his own. “Sister,” he said softly, gently. She shivered from head to toe. Her fingers quivered in his grasp. *Please, God, no, let Sister Jude be okay.* Anything that happened to Jude was her fault. Jude had been electrocuted because of her. Jude had been defrocked because of her. Jude was the only one who knew, who recognized the horrible truth before everyone else, and she paid the price for it. Mary Eunice lifted her desperate, pleading gaze to Father Joseph’s, hoping beyond hope to find some reassurance in his eyes. “I’m so sorry.” Her heart crumbled, bowing her head, unable and unwilling to restrain the tears. “Jude hanged herself in her cell just after Lana was released, before the Monsignor had the chance to reappoint her or reach out to Mother Claudia regarding her case.”

“No…” Mary Eunice shook her head. “No, I—I can’t—she wouldn’t—” She hiccuped, and she stopped trying to talk. Father Joseph squeezed her hands. Then, he took her handkerchief and dabbed away her tears as they fell. “Please tell me it isn’t true, please—”

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Sister.” Father Joseph extended an arm to her, an invitation, and like a child crawling into the lap of Santa Claus, she crawled to him, allowing him to embrace her with his bear-like arms. His wrinkled neck smelled like coffee and spice. “I’m so sorry. I know you cared a lot for her.” The whiskers of his coarse, short beard scraped against her face, and some part of her cringed at the sensation, even in all of her distress. *I want Lana.* But Father Joseph hugged her like a parent she had never known, and she didn’t have the strength to wrench away from him and flee back to the arms of the woman she loved. *How will I tell her about this? How can I tell her Jude is dead? Because of me?* “She watches over you from heaven.” A few of her blonde bangs peeked out from under her veil, and Father Joseph brushed them back beneath the sacred cloth. “All is forgiven there. She knows of your affliction. She doesn’t resent you for it. No matter how much you may resent yourself.”

Her stomach recoiled. *I need to throw up.* She swallowed hard, but it didn’t help the gagging lump
building deep in her throat. “Father—excuse me—” She tore away from him and raced out of the room, down the hall, into the women’s restroom, where she sprinted into one of the stalls and dropped to her knees in front of the ceramic bowl. Her veil fell in front of her. She ripped it off and her coif along with it, leaving the comb intact in her hair as she folded over, head in the toilet, bile spewing from her with an angry vengeance.

Lana rested in the car, enjoying the warmth of the sunlight without any of the vengeance of the cold February breeze, holding her newspaper up and browsing it; she had gotten to the puzzles, circling words in the word search, when the broad doors of the church swung open, and she peeked over the top of the paper. *It’s early for Mary Eunice to be out.* Instead, she spotted Father Joseph, his habit flapping behind him as he jogged, one knee stiff, toward her car. *What on earth?* Lana folded up her newspaper and put it aside, ink staining her fingers, and climbed out of the car. “Father Joseph?”

He stopped a few feet away from the dash of her car, chest rising and falling with heavy pants of distress. “Miss Winters, I—I’m sorry to disturb you, I…” He drifted off, clearing his throat, before he straightened his back and planted his feet on the ground, still favoring the leg with the stiff knee. “The Monsignor asked me to deliver some upsetting news to Sister Mary Eunice, and she has made herself ill in distress. I tried to comfort her, but she ran into the women’s restroom.”

“Well, at least some men have an idea of where they’re welcome. ‘I hate to interrupt, but—if you could, please—’

“Of course.” Lana took the keys from her car and locked it. “What news? Is she okay?” She started with a long stride, but Father Joseph had to scramble to keep up with her, so she slowed, grating her jaw and facing the church ahead with a hardness on her face. “What’s wrong with her?”

Father Joseph’s limp became more pronounced as he opened the large wooden door which revealed the sanctuary, all things bright and holy with light filtering through the stained glass windows casting images on the floor. The scarlet carpet muffled her footfalls. *I’ve never been in here before.* She looked back at him for direction. “The Monsignor informed me of the whereabouts of Sister Jude and Mother Claudia when he contacted me,” Father Joseph said, a woefulness tugging down the corners of his lips and his eyes. “I’m aware that the Monsignor made some promises to you about Sister Jude’s position within the asylum—”

Lana narrowed her eyes. “He said she would be restored to her place as head, or at the very least allowed to serve as a nun if she wasn’t fit to run the place anymore, but—”

He held up a hand, nodding. “But you weren’t able to contact her at the asylum and met a group of nuns who had never met her, yes, Sister Mary Eunice told me.” He stroked the gray whiskers of his beard, covering over his mouth and nose, hiding behind his bad news. “The Monsignor told me, unfortunately, that he wasn’t able to make good on his promise to you or to Jude—she was never restored to her title as a nun.” His voice softened, but no quiet volume could soften the dark truth he carried, his eyes melancholy; a sheen of tears appeared there, though he didn’t shed them. “Before he could contact Mother Claudia about her position within the order, she hanged herself in her cell. No note. No explanation.”

Oh, fucking hell. Lana bit down on the tip of her tongue to keep from dropping those words in front of the priest, who had brought her in here to comfort a nun—her girlfriend—and certainly wouldn’t appreciate her vulgarity in this time of grief. The backs of her eyes burned, some level of guilt stirring in the pit of her stomach. *I left her.* She had left. She had taken the freedom Jude granted her and run for the hills with the tape proving Kit’s innocence in tow, without a second thought for the woman who granted it. “She’s dead?” Father Joseph nodded, his eyes downcast. “I—” Mary Eunice. “Where is Sister Mary Eunice?” She’ll never forgive herself for this. She’ll
Father Joseph leaned on the edge of each pew as he passed, his bad knee swinging along with him loosely, until he headed down a narrow, dimly lit hallway. To the right, an open door gave her a glimpse into his office, the oversized chair Mary Eunice had described to her, and to the left, she spotted the sign for the women’s restroom. “In there.” The doors to the sanctuary slammed shut, and Father Joseph turned his head to the person who had entered. “Excuse me, Miss Winters, my next appointment has arrived. Please, tell her I’m sorry.” He offered a hand, which Lana allowed him to take, and he squeezed hers gently. “Have her call me once she’s feeling better. In a few days. I still would like to talk to her.”

“Yes, Father, thank you.” Lana wasted no more time lingering on him; she pushed the bathroom door open, and the instant she removed the barrier, the sound of tearful sobs mixed with retching met her ears. She scrambled past the sinks and into the stalls, which Mary Eunice had left open in her haste, her veil discarded on the floor and hair knotted around her comb, like she had started to tug it out but gotten distracted by her need to vomit. *Oh, sunshine...* Mary Eunice clung to the toilet bowl with both eyes closed, her cheek resting on the cool rim of the ceramic. Lana knelt beside her. “Sister?” She reached over to flush the toilet and took her by the shoulders, tugging her back so the jets wouldn’t spray toilet water all over her face. “Come here. Come here, lean on me.”

Mary Eunice flinched against the first touch, but then she sagged into it. “Lana?” she whispered in a trembling voice. “Lana... I feel so bad...” She flopped back onto her butt, habit and skirt pushed up above her knees. Lana shifted to give her room to crawl into her lap. “No, Lana, I don’t deserve it...” Her red face crumpled up into a distressed ball. “I killed Jude,” she whispered. “I killed Jude, it’s my fault, she’s dead—she—” Mary Eunice retched again, and Lana sat upright to push her head over the toilet. She had already emptied her stomach; she heaved, but it was a futile effort, spitting up only her own stomach acid. “Lana,” she croaked, a desperate plea with an unknown desire inside of it.

Lana smoothed her blonde bangs out of her eyes. They had grown long in the time she had lived with Lana, past due for a trim. I don’t know what to say. Lana kissed her sweaty forehead, and Mary Eunice closed her eyes, peeking at Lana through the narrowest of slits, the whites of her eyes stained red. “It’s not your fault, Sister,” Lana whispered. She reeked of sweat and vomit, but Lana paid no attention to it, cradling her face in her hands, smearing away the tear streaks on her cheeks. “It wasn’t you.”

Her swollen lips buffered against one another. “But it was me.” The words had no tone, nothing but the air passing from her mouth to give them a vague sound. “It was my body. It was my weakness, I couldn’t fight it off, I couldn’t save her—” She hiccuped. Lana wrapped her up into a tight hug, and Mary Eunice shifted her hot face into the crook of Lana’s neck. “I hurt, I’m afraid, I—I don’t know what to do.”

Squeezing her tighter around the middle, Lana rocked her there on the tile floor of the bathroom until her tail bone ached. “Let’s go home. Come on, sunshine, we need to go home. We can talk at home, and Gus will be there, and he’ll make you feel better.”

But Mary Eunice shook her head, her mouth twisted downward in distaste. “I don’t want to feel better. I don’t deserve to feel better.” She shuddered, holding fast to the front of Lana’s blouse with two white-knuckled fists. “It’s not fair...” Mary Eunice gasped desperately for air, her chest and throat rattling as she gagged on her own breath, choking herself. She tilted her head back, but it didn’t aid her, and her hands lost their tight grip, slipping off of Lana’s body and instead flapping in the air. “I can’t—”

*Oh, dear god.* Lana pressed a hand flat to Mary Eunice’s chest. “Breathe. Breathe, nice and slow.
Mary Eunice, listen to me.” *She's not listening.* Mary Eunice thrashed against her with a sort of lost desperation as the anxiety attack overwhelmed her. Her face flushed bright red and then grew deathly pale. “Mary—Mary, you're going to make yourself pass out.” The hyperventilating refused to cease, with fat tears escaping her eyes in streams and sweat running down her arms and legs and neck. She swayed where she sat. *She's dizzy.* Lana unzipped her coat and spread it out on the tile floor, and then she caught Mary Eunice by the shoulders. “Lie down.” Like the first night, those months ago, when she had encouraged Mary Eunice to lie back in the tub, she thrashed in panic. “It's okay, it's okay, lie down. I'm right here. I need you to lie down.” Like a spineless slug, Mary Eunice sagged, and Lana supported her so she didn’t fall to the hard floor.

Her pale hands flapped around, seeking Lana's, and she took them, clutching them tight. “I'm right here.” Mary Eunice's grip flexed tight enough to hurt, but then it eased; she couldn't hold it steady. “You're going to be okay. I know it's scary. Can you hear my voice?” *That tunnel is so long and deep.* Lana knew she had had times where she couldn't hear Mary Eunice's voice, where the hands on her body became someone else’s entirely, but Mary Eunice gave her hand a squeeze, an affirmation. *She can hear me.* “I love you so much, Mary Eunice.” Lana leaned over her before her resolve caved, and she lay down on the floor beside her girlfriend, trying not to think about how much time had passed since someone had mopped the floor. She kissed Mary Eunice's cheek with sloppy lips, looming over her, breathing across her face. Their hands tangled like rope, but Lana tugged one free and pressed hard on her chest so she could feel the palpitations of her heart through her chest. “I love you so much. I know you're afraid, but I'm with you. I won't let anything hurt you. You're safe with me. You're in church, and Father Joseph is just a door down the hallway. You're going to be just fine.”

A faint choking noise rose in Mary Eunice's throat. Lana shushed her. “Just breathe. Can you try to breathe with me?” Mary Eunice jerked her head, an affirmation. “Feel my hand right here, on your chest.” Lana rubbed in a counterclockwise circle in the center of her chest, above her breasts. “Breathe right here.” Mary Eunice quivered. “With me. Inhale, nice and slow.” Mary Eunice hitched her breath and choked herself, inhaling her own saliva and pitching into a coughing fit, wheezing desperately between each cough. “Sunshine, it's going to be okay. I won't leave you. Try again. Inhale slowly.” This time, Mary Eunice had more success keeping her breath from skipping into a panic, though she puffed it out faster than Lana intended. “Good, good, let's do it again.”

The massive full-body tremors slowed, leaving her with trembles in her hands and fingertips. Her hyperventilating calmed itself, though her face twitched uncontrollably. “Lana,” she moaned, a desperate, grieving sound. Lana pecked some tears off of her cheeks with her lips. “You…” Mary Eunice didn't have the energy to finish her sentence. Lana tugged the comb out of her hair and smoothed it down with her hands. Lazy blue eyes blinked hard against the bright light of the bathroom ceiling. She closed them again, groaning like in pain, and she lifted a hand to cover her eyes to shield them from the harsh lights. “Home?” she whispered, a quiet request.

Lana pressed a hand to her cheek. “Yes, sunshine, we can go home.” She tugged Mary Eunice up by the arms and propped her against the wall of the stall so she wouldn't flop over. “Tell me when the world stops spinning, and I'll help you up, okay?”

“Mhm.” Mary Eunice swallowed hard, her head leaning back, snot pouring out of her nose and down her face. Lana patted her pockets, but she didn't find a handkerchief, so she ripped off some toilet paper to wipe her nose. At her quiet prompting, Mary Eunice blew her nose into the toilet paper, and then she placed her shaky hands on Lana’s shoulders, letting her girlfriend help her stand. Together, they limped out into the cold February morning, the bright sun doing little to alleviate the cold temperature. Lana zipped up her coat around Mary Eunice, ignoring the goosebumps cropping up all over her own skin.
The car ride passed in silence, with Mary Eunice sitting far away from Lana on the seat, her eyes pointing down at the floorboards. Lana reached for her, trying to place a hand on her thigh, but Mary Eunice was out of range, so she sat in the still air of the car, belly twisting with grief as she listened to each broken sniffle leave Mary Eunice’s nose. *I want to hold you,* she wanted to press. *Let me comfort you.* She couldn’t make such a demand, but as she parked in the driveway and waited for Mary Eunice to get out first, she remained steady by her side, placing a hand on the small of her back and guiding her to the couch, where Gus anxiously awaited them, his tail battering all of the furniture in his haste to greet his owners. As Mary Eunice sank onto the sofa, he sprang up to join her, clambering into her lap. His sloppy, drooling tongue splattered across her face. “Gus, no,” she protested feebly. Her eyelashes fluttered, skin pale and shivering, and she rested her head on the arm of the couch, folding her arms above her head to protect her face from his attempts at comfort.

Lana took him by the collar. “Gus, no. Not right now.” He whined and tugged back with a strength almost rivaling her own, whimpering in grief that she wouldn’t let him comfort Mary Eunice. “Sit. Sit.” He tried to ignore the command, but on the third repetition, he sank down onto his haunches and hung his head. “Good boy.” Lana looked at Mary Eunice, but she didn’t uncover her head, curling herself into a tiny ball on the couch. *I don’t know how to help you. I want to make you feel better.* She licked her dry lips. Mary Eunice’s every exhausted breath quivered. *She just needs to rest. She wore herself out. That attack kicked her ass.* Lana smoothed a hand over her hair, easy and gentle. “I’m going to take Gus outside, okay? I’m not going anywhere.” Mary Eunice grunted in reply. Lana took the throw off of the back of the couch and placed it over her, and then she tucked one of the pillows under her head. “Get some rest. I’ll be right back.”

Gus had little interest in the outside. He lifted his leg on her rose bush, which she feared he had killed forever, but he doubled back to the front door, scratching at the screen incessantly until she opened it and let him return to Mary Eunice’s side. He didn’t jump up on the cushions beside her but rested with his chin on the edge of the sofa, pleading with round brown eyes for her to touch him. Mary Eunice didn’t pay any attention to him, her legs tucked up around her chest in the fetal position. Lana sucked her lower lip. She sat beside her. “Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, considering the first question most important. She didn’t want to press Mary Eunice if she wasn’t ready to talk.

In a thin, broken voice, Mary Eunice whispered, “No.” Her shoulders quaked, but her hands hid her face from view so Lana couldn’t wipe away her tears.

Instead, Lana took her long legs by the fuzzy skin of her calf and unfolded them, placing them in her lap. She slipped the black flats off of her feet and the small socks too, and then she rubbed each foot between her fingers, massaging its sole and arch with her thumbs, bending the toes so they cracked and straightening them again. “Okay.” She scuffed her fingernails over her ankle, grazing the hard callouses there from the years of abuse and wearing too-small shoes. “Let me know if you change your mind.” Mary Eunice curled her toes into Lana’s palm. The nail polish they had applied those months ago had chipped to nothingness. Lana traced the bones on top of her feet, and when she had exhausted the massaging and rubbing she could provide, when her fingers were weary of their task, she allowed herself to rest, glancing back to Mary Eunice’s pink-streaked face, but the lines of it had relaxed into sleep. *She wore herself out.* Lana’s stomach growled, but she didn’t make a move. She held Mary Eunice’s feet in her lap, and she would do nothing to jeopardize her girlfriend’s temporary peace.

Several hours passed before Mary Eunice stirred again, lifting her head from the pillow Lana had provided and squinting up at the afternoon sun beamed onto the wall. “Lana?” Lana stroked her leg in response, and Mary Eunice glanced down at her. “It wasn’t a bad dream, was it?” Lana shook her head. Mary Eunice closed her eyes tight, lips trembling, but she did not begin to cry.
again, not yet. “I… I can’t believe it. I can’t believe…” Lana took her by the hand and tugged her up into a seated position, dragging her nearer, and hugged her; no more panic permeated her blood, and she had the strength to hug back. “Lana, I don’t… I think I should… I, I think…” Her sentences chipped off, fragmented pieces of subjects unable to perform actions, unable to receive objects. “Sister Jude—” She hiccuped.

Lana kissed her. The stench of vomit had mostly, but not completely, faded from her breath. “It’s not your fault. She knew that. She knew it wasn’t you.” Mary Eunice shook her head, denying it, denying herself any semblance of softness or forgiveness. “Yes, she did. She did. She told the Monsignor what was wrong with you. She told him to perform the exorcism. She knew you, and she knew you would never have done any of those horrible things to her.” Lana rambled onward, wondering if she made any sense, if any of her ideas aligned with the church’s or if she was pulling shit out of her ass at an alarming rate to help Mary Eunice. *Please listen to me. Please. Please don’t blame yourself.* She leaned forward, planting another soft kiss to Mary Eunice’s unresponsive mouth.

Blue eyes averted from hers. Her hands loosened in Lana’s grip, but she didn’t relinquish them; she clung to Mary Eunice like a shipwrecked survivor clinging to a floating bit of wreckage. “I was weak.” No, you’re not weak! You’ve never been weak! “I was weak, I let—I let that *thing* inside of me.” Her breath hitched, and she shook her head as Lana tried to embrace her again. Her eyes glittered, pale orbs of anguish, of emptiness. “And it hurt everyone, it hurt you, it hurt Jude, it hurt Kit, it hurt Clara and the Monsignor—” She covered her mouth and nose with one hand, eyes drawn downward. “I did that to her—”

“No, you didn’t. You didn’t do anything! You didn’t do anything wrong. Jude wasn’t in her right mind anymore—”

*Because of me, because I scrambled her brain* like an egg! I—I tried to get Dr. Arden to lobotomize her! I electrocuted her until she couldn’t think anymore! Until she couldn’t remember my name, or anyone else’s! Because I thought it would shut her up and keep her from telling anyone about what had happened to me! I was there, Lana, I was in my head, I watched it all happen, and I couldn’t do anything, I was stupid and pathetic and weak and now she’s dead and it’s my fault!” Lana blinked, her mouth open in a gaping O. She had never heard Mary Eunice shout before, not like that. Mary Eunice pushed back away from her, and in spite of the pain on her face, the agony which transformed itself into anger, a shadow of fear crossed her face. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I don’t mean to shout.”

Lana reached for her. She flinched away, like she thought the hand would strike her where it only sought to tuck her hair behind her ear. Lana withdrew her hand. “Shout if it makes you feel better.”

“It doesn’t.”

*She’s bottling it up. She needs to feel it.* Lana pursed her lower lip, trying to think of a solution, of something she could say to bring some comfort to Mary Eunice. “It’s not your fault. Jude knew that. I know that.”

Mary Eunice shook her head. “My faith was weak. Everyone around me paid the price.”

Desperately, Lana wanted to take her hands and squeeze them tight until she branded her convictions right into Mary Eunice’s soul. “Your faith is not weak. I live with you. I see it every day.” She kept shaking her head, but Lana took her by the chin. “No, listen—listen to me.” She held Mary Eunice’s teary blue eyes in her own, the gravity of gazes fixing them in place. “You are the most faithful person I have ever met. I see God in your eyes every day. I see God inside of you. If it weren’t for your faith, your love, I would never be able to do that.”
“Possession is a matter of faith, Lana. And mine was so frail that I let that monster take it away from me.” She shivered. “I haven’t felt God since before it was inside of me. It took me with it, all of the good parts. It ate my soul. I’m just a shell.”

“No, you’re not.”

Mary Eunice tugged away from Lana, but Lana refused to let her leave, instead leaning forward and kissing her on the mouth. Mary Eunice caved, but she didn’t reciprocate. Lana unbuttoned the top of her habit, revealing the sweater underneath, and tossed it aside once she had loosened it enough. She kissed down her jawline, down her neck, until Mary Eunice whined and said, “Lana, stop.” She obeyed without question or comment. A hot flush bled over her neck. “I don’t want to do that right now—I just—I’m afraid, and I’m hurt, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I just so—I’m scared, I—” Her voice broke. “I wish it were me instead of her, I miss her so much, I want her back, I just want her to tell me I’m stupid and cane me over her desk one more time, she was the only person who cared about me for years and I killed her and everything hurts, Lana, everything hurts, and I know you can make it feel better but right now I don’t want that.”

Mary Eunice had closed her eyes tight, so Lana took the opportunity to place a tender hand on her cheek. She flinched, but she didn’t remove it. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. You don’t owe me an explanation.” Mary Eunice nodded, exhaling a shaky breath, tears escaping from the corners of her closed eyes. “What scares you? Why are you afraid?”

The face nuzzled into her palm, a cat marking its territory. “I’m afraid it will come back. I’m afraid I won’t be able to stop it, again, and I’ll hurt you.” She shuddered. “Lana?”

“Yes?”

“You have a gun.”

“Yes, I do, to keep us safe.”

“If something happens, where I—I can’t control myself anymore, and I’m hurting people, will you—will you stop me?” Lana pinched Mary Eunice in an involuntary flex at the dark request. Mary Eunice scrambled to right herself. “I’m so afraid I’ll become that thing again, I have nightmares about it—I don’t mean you should kill me, but just—just so I don’t hurt anyone, just so no one else has to go through it again—”

“You know that’s not the kind of promise I can make. It’s not the kind of promise I could ever hope to keep.” Lana leaned forward, the tips of their noses almost touching, and planted a kiss there so Mary Eunice opened her eyes. “I love you too much to hurt you. I love you too much to dream of hurting you, ever.” The azure hue of her eyes burned Lana’s very soul. “Nothing like that will happen. It will never happen to you again. You don’t need to worry about it.”

Mary Eunice gave her a watery smile. “I’m sorry, Lana. I don’t have any right to ask that of you.” She exhaled. It fanned across Lana’s face. “I love you, too. If I didn’t have you, I—I don’t know what would have happened to me. If I ever would have had a chance without you.” She leaned into Lana’s soft touch. “I need to pray.”

“Let me pray with you.”

Her long eyelashes fluttered upward. “You—you would like to pray with me?”

Lana smiled. “I want to make you feel better. I want to be with you.”

“I don’t think I can feel better. I don’t think I’ll ever stop missing her. Or hating myself for it.”
“I’m sorry. I know how much she meant to you.”

Their fingers laced together, and Lana knelt beside Mary Eunice on the floor, their heads bowed in prayer. “Thank you, Lana,” Mary Eunice whispered. “I… I’m sorry that I shouted. Please forgive me.”

Lana kissed her temple. “It never happened.” A rosary fitted between their two hands, the beads between their skins leaving indents. In silence, they bowed their hands and began to pray, each of them wishing for something different, one requesting forgiveness and one requesting peace, each seeking something in the prayer to benefit the other.

Mary Eunice wept throughout the day as she cooked and cleaned and did her usual chores, and Lana wrote and edited, but she stopped earlier than usual for them to share a shower and retire into the floor of the bedroom, not yet clothed but clothing themselves in the blankets and one another’s skin. They didn’t tangle themselves in the foreplay of lovemaking which could have no resolve; from their nudity, they drew comfort, not arousal. Mary Eunice read from Lana’s manuscript while Lana played with her hair, wrapping it up into a braid and letting it fall and repeating. “You don’t read very fast,” Lana observed. “Still on chapter three?”

“What did you expect? I'm a dumb high school dropout.”

“You're not dumb.” Lana wrapped her arms around her from behind and kissed her neck. “What do you think?”

“I think you're distracting me.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No!” Mary Eunice didn’t quite manage a giggle, but her voice was light, and she turned her head around to exchange a small kiss with Lana. “No, never.” She pressed her front against her girlfriend’s. “Thank you, Lana. For staying with me.” Her arms around Lana’s neck fit like a snug pair of jeans. Nothing about this made her uncomfortable. All of the ways she had imagined her future as a child, naked beside some faceless man, had made her grateful for her habit as an adult, in which she could bury herself and hide her body from any potential viewers. But she didn’t want to hide herself from Lana. She wanted Lana to look at her, all of her, all of her nude skin which she had never imagined allowing anyone to see, much less touch. She dreamed of Lana’s fingers on her most tender places, the dreams which made her crawl with blush and ease into an icy shower to banish all of the urges blossoming in her nether regions.

Lana pecked her pulse point. “Don’t thank me, sunshine. You were with my family. I’m going to be with you now.” Mary Eunice rested her chin on her shoulder, releasing the stack of papers; she had forgotten the task at hand and abandoned it in favor of snuggling beside her girlfriend in the floor, sprawled out on the shag carpet. Her heart ached, and tears stung the back of her eyes, and the unshakeable guilt probed at her insides, but Lana’s skin smelled like the floral lotion she smeared across it after her shower, and her eyes held all the warmth Mary Eunice’s heart lacked. “Father Joseph wanted you to call him tomorrow, when you felt better.” Lana teased a hand through her hair. “You could ask him where they buried her.”

Shaking her head, Mary Eunice closed her eyes. The lump budded in her throat, hot and furious again. “They won’t have buried her.” Her toes curled in the sheets, tangling them around her own ankles, trying to distract herself. Her voice shook, nonetheless. “Suicide—” The word trembled, hard for her to pronounce; she had always used softer terms when talking about her own mother. For the second time in her life, someone who had cared about her, a maternal figure, took their own life, and it made Mary Eunice’s stomach bubble with grief and guilt. “Suicide is a mortal sin. They wouldn’t have thought her deserving—deserving of a Catholic funeral and burial or
A thumb trailed over her cheek bone, but she hadn’t shed another tear. Not yet. “Then what would they have done with her?”

Mary Eunice shrugged. “I… I suppose they would’ve tried to return her to her family, if she had any, but I don’t think she did.” She had no one. I had no one. We had each other, in whatever broken order we managed. “Briarcliff has a crematorium. Old. Unused. I would guess they did that. I don’t know what they would’ve done with the ashes.”

A wrinkle appeared between Lana’s eyebrows. “I thought cremation was against the church’s doctrine.”

“It is, for the faithfully departed. But, for a mortal sin, you—you have to confess and repent, otherwise it’s not…” She drifted off. She didn’t know how to explain it; her jumbled brain had taken in too much information in one day to keep relaying the information to Lana. “A person who commits a mortal sin has to demonstrate true contrition. And someone who has taken their own life doesn’t have the ability to do that, because—they’re dead. So they’re not considered departed in good faith. They’re traitors of the church in death. Their remains can’t be given the same respect as a true believer.”

Her voice quivered, and Lana leaned forward to kiss her forehead. “I’m so sorry.” She cradled Mary Eunice’s face in her hands like an infant. “I’ll do whatever I can to help you find her. To give her what she deserved.”

Oh, Lana. The hands pressed into her cheeks; she knew Lana could feel the flush of heat to her face. “But she hurt you.” Mary Eunice extended her hand, grazing a single index finger over the burn scar on Lana’s temple, barely visible and masked by her long, dark hair. “She kept you in that place—she hurt Wendy—” Her voice choked, and her eyes fluttered shut, shedding the tears still held in her eyes. I loved her so much. She was so good to me. But she hurt you, and I don’t know how you could ever forgive her.

Lana shook her head, tucking her hair behind her ear. “She knew it was wrong. She got me my freedom. And—however angry I am at her for what she did to Wendy, I know you loved her, and you deserve to say goodbye.” She held a dark look in her eyes, a shadow of something like anger, and Mary Eunice bit her lower lip.

“I’m sorry, Lana. She could murmur a thousand apologies, and they never would hold a candle to the guilt she felt for helping hold Lana in the walls of Briarcliff. “Can I confess something to you?” Lana asked.

She blinked in surprise. “Of course, Lana. Anything.”

One of the soft hands left her face, and Mary Eunice resisted the urge to chase it by bowing her head. Instead, the hand wrapped around her own and clutched it. “You may think it cynical of me. And I may be wrong. But…” Her dark eyes darted away, around the room, down to Gus who slept at the foot of their little pallet on the floor, then back up to Mary Eunice. “I don’t think the Monsignor tried to help her. I don’t think he ever intended to follow through with his promise to me.”

“Lana!” Mary Eunice’s face fell in distress, her mouth making a little O, choking on her own air before she stammered, “N-No, no, the Monsignor would never. The Monsignor and Sister Jude—they were best friends, he loved her, he would never do something like that to her. He only ever stripped her of her title in the first place because of me, he never would’ve hurt her otherwise, if it weren’t for—”

“Hey, hey, calm down.” Mary Eunice puffed at the instruction, but she fell silent with a huff, and
Lana wiped the tears from her cheeks with the corner of the sheet. “I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just what I think about him. Based on how I saw him treat her, and how he treated you. I don’t trust him.”

“I do.” She tried to glare at Lana, but she couldn’t manage it. Every time she look at her girlfriend, her heart floundered with useless joy and overwhelming love, muddling all of her other emotions. “I have to trust him. I have to trust my superiors. I trust he did everything in his power—Sister Jude trusted him, too.”

Lana sighed. *I haven’t convinced her of anything.* Lana kissed her, tender and sweet, on the mouth. “I know. I know. But I don’t have to like him. I don’t like the way he treated you. It worries me. And worrying about you is my job now.” Mary Eunice hooked one of her legs with Lana’s at the knee. “Are you ready to get some sleep?” Mary Eunice bobbed her head. Lana took the manuscript away from her. “Then let’s put away the nightmare material for the night.” She folded it into the drawer of the nightstand to handle in the morning. “Will you wake me up if you have a dream?”

Mary Eunice hesitated. “Lana, I… I don’t want to disturb you, your rest is important…”

“No amount of sleep is as important to me as you are. I want you to wake me up. Please. Let me help you, like you help me.”

*That’s fair.* Some part of her would always whisper condemnations, would always resent her for allowing Lana to love her. She didn’t know if she would ever convince herself she deserved Lana’s affection. She nodded. “Alright,” she whispered. Lana pecked her on the tip of her nose, and she brushed her lips alongside the bump of her girlfriend’s chin, though she didn’t have the energy to do anything else. She pressed her face into the pillow. “I love you, Lana.”

“That’s fair. Some part of her would always whisper condemnations, would always resent her for allowing Lana to love her. She didn’t know if she would ever convince herself she deserved Lana’s affection. She nodded. “Alright,” she whispered. Lana pecked her on the tip of her nose, and she brushed her lips alongside the bump of her girlfriend’s chin, though she didn’t have the energy to do anything else. She pressed her face into the pillow. “I love you, Lana.”

“No amount of sleep is as important to me as you are. I want you to wake me up. Please. Let me help you, like you help me.”

*I have so many names.* Mary Eunice wondered if Lana preferred one over the other, if Lana liked to call her her name or her title or her nicknames more. *I don’t have a favorite.* She liked being Lana’s sunshine, but she liked being Lana’s Sister, too—the title showed how she belonged both to Lana and to God. And Lana said her name so sweetly and tenderly, with the perfect lilt she could hear in her head. She drifted off to sleep playing the sound of Lana’s voice in her head over and over again, each time using a different name in the same loving tone.

But the peace didn’t last. In her sleep, she heard Pepper shriek, “Miss Elsa! Miss Elsa!” though her ears were plugged up and stuffy. She couldn’t open her eyes. *Where am I?* The cold stone floor of the asylum pierced her sheer nightgown. She didn’t remember putting it on. Her hair hung around her in a golden sprawl. *I can’t move. I need to put on my veil. I’m not in my room. I should never be unveiled out of my room.* She tried to lift her hand, but she couldn’t manage it. “Miss Elsa!”

*Pepper.* Mary Eunice knew that name—Pepper called Sister Jude Elsa for some reason none of them could fathom. Heavy footfalls rattled through the brick to her ear. “Pepper?” *Sister Jude.* “What on earth…” A hand, frigid, stinging with its very touch, cradled her cheek. “Good Lord, girl, you’re burning up.” It shifted to her forehead and then back to her cheek, patting hard. “Sister Mary Eunice? Can you hear me?”

The pats on her face stung like grease popping on her skin. *Yes, Sister, I hear you, oh, it hurts…* She parted her lips. Her mouth had never tasted so dry and stale before in her life. Her tongue had stuck in her saliva, thick as syrup, and wriggled like a beached eel. “Uhn…” The moan ripped from her raw, aching vocal cords, weak and thin in its creation.

The hard hand left her cheek, granting temporary relief, before two arms slipped under her long body. *No, no, no…* Mary Eunice tried to garble a protest, but she couldn’t manage more than
another simple croak before her throat had worn itself out. The arms scooped her up. “Oh, dear child.” Her arms flopped uselessly, unable to do anything, unable to grab the front of Sister Jude’s habit or even arrange herself in a more comfortable position to ease the struggle of carrying her through the vacant hallways of Briarcliff. Each rocking step pained her, jolted her sensitive body. Is this how I’m going to die? Mary Eunice had never imagined death hurting so much. When Jesus took her away, she expected it to be fast and painless, and she had hoped to experience it many years from now, surrounded by people she loved.

But if she died with Sister Jude and Pepper, she supposed those were two people who loved her, and she could accept it. The floor passed in a weary haze. I’m so thirsty. Her lungs wheezed. Her chest had never sizzled like this before in her life, gargling with each breath, like she had inhaled water in her last bath and hadn’t realized it. Her slow, shallow breath syncopated Sister Jude’s rapid, strained pants, and once she staggered into the infirmary, she dropped Mary Eunice’s body onto an empty bed. Agony pulsed through her. She grunted. “I’m so sorry. You stupid, foolish girl.” A hand swept her bangs from her eyes, which she didn’t have the strength to open. “You’re a faithful fool. May God watch over you.”

The hand left, replaced by an itchy blanket, and the footsteps headed across the room to the telephone. “Arthur!” she snapped. “I need you here, right now! Sister Mary Eunice is ill. She needs a hospital. You know the ambulance won’t come out in this weather—oh, for the love of God, hurry!” Sister Jude slammed the phone back on the hook and tended to Mary Eunice, stabbing her with needles to hydrate her; each one made her innards cringe, wishing she had the health to faint. “Breathe, girl, just breathe.” A stethoscope pressed to the top of her chest. “Your lungs are just gargling.” She secured a mask over her mouth and nose and flicked on a loud machine pumping a thin mist into her lungs.

Mary Eunice didn’t know how long it took Dr. Arden to arrive, but at the sound of his feet on the stone floor, Sister Jude began to strip the oxygen mask off of her and disconnect her IV. “She needs a hospital right now,” she growled. “Her skin is blue!”

“She needs to stay here.”

“Are you out of your mind? Look at her! She needs a doctor!”

“I am a doctor.”

“A real doctor!”

“While your doubtful opinion about my skill as a physician stings, I’m afraid we won’t be able to get through the hospital.” His hands, rougher than Sister Jude’s, placed the mask over her mouth and nose again. “The weather is miserable. If we got stranded, we would have no chance of supportive care for her. The roads aren’t clear. She’s safer here, where we can keep her stable, at least until the roads can be cleared.”

Sister Jude huffed. “Her lungs sound like the bubbles in a hot tub. What are you going to do for her? Breathe for her?”

“I’m going to give her antibiotics for the pneumonia she developed under your watch, trying to uphold your ridiculous faith.”

“I never asked her to give up her bed for Lent! She made that stupid decision all on her own!”

“She’s still a child!” he scoffed. “She’s seventeen years old! You’ve burdened her, giving her that microcephalic beast to care for—”
“Pepper has done wonders for helping Mary Eunice out of her shell—as a matter of fact, Pepper was the one who found her like this.” Somewhere beyond them, Pepper hummed, and Mary Eunice realized for the first time that Pepper had followed Sister Jude to the infirmary—she had been there the whole time. “And you’re one to talk, calling her a child. The way you look at her, the way no man should look at a girl, nun or not. It’s despicable.”

“I love her because she is pure. If you think I would do anything to pervert her, you’ve misunderstood her, fundamentally.”

“I understand her perfectly well!”

They kept arguing, but Mary Eunice stopped paying attention to them, turning inside of her own head. *This isn’t right. Sister Jude is dead.* The thought echoed, and their voices fell silent. *Sister Jude is dead. Father Joseph said so. Sister Jude is dead.* But the memory hadn’t ended, yet; the firm mattress of the infirmary pressed against her, holding her in the dream. She opened her eyes and sat up. Pepper still stood at the foot of her bed, though Dr. Arden and Sister Jude were nowhere in sight. “Pepper?” she whispered. She stepped out of bed and approached the microcephalic woman, her lips pursed in concentration. “Is something wrong?”

Pepper held her gaze. An unknown power flushed through Mary Eunice, tinting her eyes orange, and into those eyes, the demon sucked her, reading the memories of Pepper, her first patient, her personal project. A sink filled with blood, a man tossing her out of the room, the body of a baby and his ears, *oh, his sweet little ears*, hanging off of his face and floating in the water. Pepper crumpled and cried in her own memory, and then her sister called the police, and they wrestled her into the car. She saw herself, herself through Pepper’s eyes. “You made me throw up,” her previous self said. Mary Eunice’s heart sank. *She was innocent. She was always innocent.* Pepper hugged her previous self, guilt and grief written in her eyes.

But Mary Eunice sat upright from her dream drenched in a cold sweat. Lana had rolled away from her in sleep, sprawled on the carpet; she no longer rested on the blankets. *She said I should wake her. She said I need to wake her. I had a dream.* Mary Eunice gulped and grabbed Lana by the shoulders. “I’ve got to do something! Pepper is innocent! Pepper did nothing wrong! She’s still at Briarcliff and she did nothing wrong!” “Lana? Lana, Pepper—Pepper is innocent, Lana, please wake up, I’ve got to tell you about Pepper.”

“‘S in the kitchen,” Lana grumbled. But as Mary Eunice pinched her shoulders a little tighter, she stirred from her sleep and sat up. “What? What’s the matter? I heard you… Oh, what did you say? I’m sorry.”

Mary Eunice took the clean nightgown from after last night’s shower and wrapped it around herself. “It’s Pepper. At Briarcliff. She—She’s innocent, she didn’t kill her sister’s baby.”

Lana rubbed her eyes with her fists. “You told me she did.”

“I thought she did, her sister said she did, but she lied—her husband did it. Pepper didn’t do anything wrong, she doesn’t belong there, she doesn’t deserve to—”

“Whoa. Are we talking about jailbreak at three in the morning?”

Mary Eunice gazed at Lana desperately. “We’ve got to get her out of there! She doesn’t deserve to be in there! She didn’t do anything wrong! She only liked me and Sister Jude—who knows what’s happened to her without either of us? She already lost so much!”

“Are you sure this wasn’t just a weird dream?”
“Yes! I read her mind, I saw what she thought! I saw her memories! She didn’t do it! She’s in there for no reason! She deserves her freedom!”

Lana gaped at her, still half-asleep. “Mary Eunice, I—what do you think we can do about it? Supposing you’re right, and supposing we could prove it, and supposing they would release her into our care, what would we do with her then? Where would we put her? Who’s going to take care of her? She—Well, she isn’t exactly self-sufficient, is she?”

“Well, no…”

“Where was she before Briarcliff?”

Mary Eunice bit her lower lip, averting her eyes. You’re stupid, just like Sister Jude said in the dream. “Her sister told me she belonged to a traveling circus. A freak show. But that might have been a lie, too. Pepper never had a way to tell me much about herself.” You can’t just leave her. You can’t abandon her. You wouldn’t leave Lana behind. “Lana, we’ve got to do something! Anything—She was my friend. I can’t just leave her in there to rot.” She clambered to her feet and slipped the nightgown over her head, clothing her nude body, which was covered in creases from sleeping on crumpled blankets.

Lana stumbled up after her. “Where are you going? What are you doing?” She paused to grab her robe off of the empty bed and wrap it around herself. “Sister? What’s the matter?”

“I’ve got to get her out of there, Lana, I—I’ve done so much wrong, if I just do one thing right, maybe it will redeem my soul.” Mary Eunice sucked in a deep breath, headed up the hall, through the living room, into the office. “If I just do this right, maybe Sister Jude will forgive me—Pepper can go anywhere, anywhere but there, but that place.” Lana touched her shoulders as she sank into the office chair. “There are homes for people like her, good homes.”

Lana’s tired eyes peered down at her. “I don’t want you to make a mistake. We both left that place behind.” But she didn’t stop Mary Eunice from picking up the phone.

“We left it behind because other people set us free,” Mary Eunice whispered. Sister Jude had freed Lana, and the Monsignor had freed her—not only from Briarcliff, but also from her own demons, from her own body. “Someone needs to set Pepper free. And I don’t know if there’s anyone there who will.”

Softly clearing her throat, Lana nodded slowly. “I understand. That you need to do it. And…” She sighed. “I’ll help you any way I can.”

Mary Eunice picked up the phone. What am I doing? she wondered. What am I going to do with her? Am I crazy? She had wondered that several times. She hadn’t yet reached a conclusive answer. I think so. The operator answered the phone. “Hi, can you please connect me to Dr. Arthur Arden?” Lana cringed. Mary Eunice took her hand and listened to the phone ring on the other end of the line, clutching tighter with each passing sound.
The Whole World Is Under Control of the Evil One

Chapter Notes

1 John 5:19

The dark forest loomed over Lana and Mary Eunice as they moved through it, Mary Eunice leading, Lana following as quietly as a shadow, their hands loosely clasped in one another’s, fingers tangled together. “Are you sure you know where you’re going?” Lana asked, brows quirking together. She placed her feet on a well-trodden path, no crumbling leaves covering it to create a sound, but the number of feet which had tramped down the leaves concerned her. Someone else, something else, had walked this path regularly. This is a mistake. We shouldn’t be here. Lana bit her lower lip, wondering if it was too late to turn back now, to change her mind. It would kill her if I did that. She had promised her loyalty to this risky venture. She loved Mary Eunice, and for that, she tiptoed after her through the gloomy, murky forest, wrapped in coats and shivering in the frigid breeze.

Mary Eunice fingered the ring on the necklace around her neck. It had become her new rosary, Lana noticed; she played with it, toyed with it, for comfort where in the past she would have touched her string of beads. “I’m certain. This was the path we all took to get to the cars when we had to leave for any reason. I didn’t take it often, but Sister Jude made sure we all knew it, in case there was an emergency and we had to get away. The Monsignor and Dr. Arden park their cars off the other way, and it forks in the middle.” She caught her fingers between Lana’s and tugged her deeper into the frigid forest, the ground slickened by frost and a thin layer of snow on top of the still leaves. It would be beautiful. Lana’s stomach whirled. This place held too many memories for her to appreciate its beauty. In these woods, she’d approached Mary Eunice to gain access to the asylum and damned herself in the process; in these woods, she’d fled the asylum only to stumble across Clara’s corpse; in these woods, she’d dashed back into the asylum for safety from the zombies staggering after her and Kit and Grace. She found nothing here but nausea.

The cold air had muted any chance of catching a scent of rot. “Are you sure he got rid of the zombies? Whatever you call them—breathers?” Lana shuddered, her other hand burrowed in the pocket of her coat, squeezing Mary Eunice’s tight enough to feel the pulse thrumming in her thumb. “I didn’t come out here to get eaten.” I can’t believe I came out here at all. I can’t believe I let you talk me into this. I thought we had both left this place behind forever.

“Raspers,” Mary Eunice corrected. Her breath steamed from her mouth in a gray cloud, dancing in the empty air in front of her like a silvery fairy. “He killed them all. Before I left. He killed them all to spite me, because I—I wanted to—” She cut herself off, and pale tears shivered on the surface of her eyes. Lana rubbed her thumb on the back of her girlfriend’s. “I tried to give Sister Jude a transorbital lobotomy.” Mary Eunice’s voice quivered as she spoke. Her thumb and forefinger looped through the ring around her neck, tugging on the chain and sliding the antique band back and forth over it with a faint rattling noise. This isn’t just hard for me. This is hard for her. She never wanted to do this. She’s only here because she feels guilty. Lana wondered if she should have tried harder to convince Mary Eunice of her own innocence before caving to her desire to come here. I could never have done it. She never would’ve believed me. Lana didn’t understand many things about Mary Eunice’s faith, but she knew Mary Eunice blamed herself for every action the demon had performed while inside of her body. Mary Eunice believed she should have had the proper faith to prevent the invasion and faulted every moment she spent, weak and
helpless, under the thumb of the supernatural power. We don’t even have to go in the place. We’ll get Pepper, and we’ll leave. We’ll take her back to the church, like Father Joseph said. He’ll find a place for her. And then we can forget this place forever. We’ll never have to come back.

Tears clear as crystals slid down Mary Eunice’s cheeks. She bowed her head, trying to disguise them from Lana, but Lana tugged her back. “Hey. Hey. Hold on a second.” Mary Eunice pulled onward, head bowed, but Lana dug in her heels. “Mary Eunice.” Her breath quivered in her shoulders as she shuffled around to face Lana, her eyes shut tight and mouth set into a thin line. She’s afraid, and she’s still mourning. Lana took her hand out of her pocket, hoping the close quarters had warmed it, and dashed away each of the tears leaving tracks on her face. “It’s going to be okay. We’re going to get her away from here. And then we never have to come back, neither one of us. We’ll have Pepper, and we’ll be free. Father Joseph will find a place for her where you can see her.” I should’ve made her think it over. I should’ve said no. But Lana knew the torment guilt created in her own stomach when she lingered too long on thoughts of Wendy, of what her need for a story had done to them, and she couldn’t bear to think Mary Eunice lived with the same grief and guilt inside of her, festering inside like an oozing wound. Lana caressed Mary Eunice’s cheek with the back of her hand, but Mary Eunice pulled back, her whole face jerking. Pausing, hand midair, Lana frowned. “What’s the matter?”

She shook her head. “I—I’m fine, I just…” She hiccuped. “I don’t know, I feel sick.” Lana pressed the back of her hand to Mary Eunice’s face—hot in spite of the vicious winter breeze rattling the trees. She’s feverish. Her lips pursed. At the concerned look, Mary Eunice scrambled to right herself. “I—I’m sure it’s nothing. I just don’t want to be here.” She leaned into Lana’s gentle touch and hummed a soft note at the fingers on her cheeks. Settle down. Lana drew a few circles on her cheek with the pad of her thumb. With the rhythm of her movement, another long sigh fluttered from her lips. “Lana, I love you.” She said the words too quickly, like she feared something would tear them apart, like someone would stuff a sock into her mouth and keep her from speaking. “I love you,” she repeated, softer.

Lana blinked, scanning her face with a frown on her lips. “I love you, too.” She stood on her toes to press a kiss to her lips. “You feel warm. I don’t want you to get sick again.” Mary Eunice shook her head, eyes downcast. Lana grabbed a lock of her hair and tucked it behind her ear, but the breeze grabbed it away from her fingers and snatched the silvery strands to the wind. Mary Eunice’s dark eyelashes shivered, like she concentrated hard on something at hand. “Are you sure you’re alright? We can always come back another day.” Or we couldn’t. We could just stay away forever and forget that you remembered anything, forget that Pepper exists at all.

Something glinted in her eyes, metallic and hard, and she swatted Lana’s hand away with more force than was necessary. “I’m fine!” Her voice crawled up the octave. Lana snatched her hand back like Mary Eunice had burnt her. Mary Eunice whirled away from her, but Lana caught her by the elbow. She stiffened, fat tears rolling down her cheeks. “Please, Lana—” Her face crumpled up at the corners of her eyes and her lips. “Let’s, please, let’s just get Pepper and leave, before anyone finds us.” She tugged her arm out of Lana’s grasp and headed down the trail with her head down. There’s something wrong. Lana chewed her lower lip as she watched Mary Eunice’s retreating form. The wind whispered through the barren branches of the trees, something almost like words, ancient Latin chanting into a rhythm. It’s this place. It’s unnerving. She saw the worst parts of her life back here. She’s trying not to break. Mary Eunice broke when closest to Lana, where she felt safe. She doesn’t want me too close until she’s able to lose all of the stress from here. She never had support when she was here. She doesn’t know how to handle it.

Lana had an explanation, but it didn’t ease the tension gathering in the pit of her gut as she followed Mary Eunice down the path. No birds sang nor crickets chirped; winter had deadened the landscape, though she wondered if it ever came to life in the spring and summer, or if the mood of the dead and dying within the asylum had permanently altered the surrounding
environment. She said she used to see deer out here. Was that before the raspers? Did they kill the wildlife? Lana shoved her hands deep into her pockets and exhaled through her nose, barely keeping Mary Eunice’s silhouette in sight where she strode ahead, almost jogging down the path. Through the trees, she spied the back wall of the asylum, and she increased her pace. She’s right. We need to get the hell out of here.

Outside the building, Mary Eunice paced, one hand in the pocket of her coat—fondling the rosary, Lana assumed—and the other still playing with the ring on her necklace. She glanced back at Lana and flanked her, but she couldn’t stop shifting her weight from foot to foot. “Is this where he told you to meet him?” Lana asked, studying Mary Eunice, the way she shifted and quivered in the gray wintry light. I want to touch her. But Mary Eunice had batted her away just a moment ago. She wouldn’t push her luck.

The hand withdrew from Mary Eunice’s pocket, beads of the rosary wrapped around her fingers, crucifix dangling from her thumb. She offered her hand to Lana, nodding. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, softer and weaker than before. “I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

The cold beads dug into Lana’s hand as she tangled her fingers with Mary Eunice’s again, each sacred piece piercing her skin. She didn’t let it stop her from clasping her girlfriend’s hand. “It’s fine. I’m not mad.” The teary sheen on Mary Eunice’s eyes made Lana want to touch her face again, but she restrained herself. “It’s okay. We’ll be going home soon, okay? And you’ll never have to come back here again.” Mary Eunice bobbed her head. She faced Lana and gazed into her eyes, but pain rested deep in the lines of her face, an almost torn expression there in the corners of her eyes and her lips; she didn’t focus on Lana’s face, but instead she gazed through her, preoccupied and vacant. Lana didn’t dare ask if she was alright—it had irritated Mary Eunice before—but instead she arched an eyebrow, biting her lower lip, before she prompted, “Sister?”

Mary Eunice blinked, breaking the vacant look in her eyes. She licked her lips. “I’m fine, Lana,” she said, wispy as the warm breath leaving her lips and curling as gray steam into the air. She bowed her head and kissed Lana’s lips, her mouth dry and chapped. Her hot breath fanned across Lana’s face, the usual sweet flavor to it. Lana placed her free hand on Mary Eunice’s hip and tugged her closer, and Mary Eunice slipped out of the kiss. What? Lana grunted with distaste at first, but then Mary Eunice hugged her, both arms wrapping around her middle, chin resting on her shoulder. She returned the embrace, rubbing Mary Eunice’s back in lopsided circles to soothe her. We should’ve brought Gus. She would’ve felt safer, then.

Lana pressed a kiss to her cheek. “It’s okay,” she whispered. “It’s okay.” The wispy short pieces of Mary Eunice’s hair under her ears tickled her nose. “What’s scaring you? There’s no one out here but us.”

“I—I don’t know.” Mary Eunice buried her face in the crook of Lana’s neck. “It feels…” She drifted off. Her face screwed up, pinching tight, and Lana didn’t interrupt, though she didn’t finish her sentence and clutched Lana’s body tighter so she could barely breathe for the pressure. “I don’t know,” she said again. Lana swayed back and forth, rocking in the breeze like the trunks of the trees bending to the pressure of the wind. Mary Eunice held tight to her. Her breath hitched and gasped like she stifled sobs deep in her throat, but she kept the sound quiet, no louder than the snow drifting from the overcast sky landing on the leaves.

Heavy footsteps proceeded through the forest, approaching them, with long pauses of strides between them. Mary Eunice sniffed long and hard before she pulled away from Lana, wiping her nose on the back of her hand and turning to face the trail which led to the door of the asylum. They didn’t sever completely. Their hands lingered in one another’s grasps; neither of them feared Dr. Arden enough to allow him to separate them, even as he came into view. Mary Eunice’s hand flexed tighter around Lana’s. He paused at the mouth of the trail at the sight of her. “Sister,” he
greeted. Lana glanced sideways at her face; a watery smile had crawled upon her lips as she nodded. He approached her with open arms and held her by the shoulders. “I feared the worst had become of you since you left so suddenly. Along with everyone else.”

Mary Eunice grimaced at his bold touch, but her hand uncurled from Lana’s as she lifted her chin to look Dr. Arden in the eye. “Did—Did the Monsignor share anything? About what happened to me?”

“I attended the exorcism until I was told I had been replaced by another attending physician. But—no. You vanished overnight, along with all of the others.”

“That was a lie,” Lana said. He looked at her, a downward twist to his mouth, loathing that she had the audacity to speak without being spoken to. “There was no other attending physician. The Monsignor lied.”

Mary Eunice cast her eyes downward. “Lana,” she whispered, placating her. Louder, to Dr. Arden, she said, “I—I’m afraid I don’t remember any of that—or everything that happened here, either. I only see things in my nightmares. It becomes more clear as time passes. I… I am truly sorry for anything I might have done—”

“It’s already forgiven, Sister.”

She blinked, long and slow. Lana’s stomach tightened with distaste at the way he studied Mary Eunice, a scientist studying a bug specimen in a glass, a biologist peering into a microscope, but Mary Eunice didn’t notice. Her gaze softened with gratitude. “Thank you, Doctor.” She reached into her pocket and withdrew the dangling ruby earrings, pinching each of them by the hooks, like she feared touching them with any length of time. “I believe these belong to you… Thank you for your thoughtfulness, but I’m afraid it’s not incredibly Christlike of me to keep them.”

He smiled. “I understand.” The earrings folded into his large palm, and he clutched them with no disgust upon his face as he tucked them back into his pockets. He took Mary Eunice’s hand, like a bull clutching fine china. Lana bit back the urge to swat him back. An irritated sigh puffed from her nose. Paws off! she wanted to snap. Mary Eunice offered her other hand to Lana, palm up, and Lana accepted it. Mine. The man studied her girlfriend with such lust buried in his eyes, such secret yearning, craving nearness with her. He offered his home. She would have gone with him, if I hadn’t agreed to take her. Lana swallowed the hard lump swelling up in her throat. Fate and chance had led her to agreeing to shelter Mary Eunice. Fate and chance had protected her from this predator. Perhaps there is a God after all.

Lana didn’t linger on the notion. “We came for Pepper,” she said, blunt and firm, and when he glowered down at her again, she set her jaw and held his gaze, obstinate and dark. Mary Eunice withdrew her hand from his. She’s with me. You won’t take her away from me. Mary Eunice’s face crumpled as if in sudden pain, but Lana only spotted it out of the corner of her eye, too busy regarding the tall man, curling her toes in her shoes. “Where is she?”

He glared down at their joined hands, but he didn’t remark upon it. “I asked her to lead the raspers away.” Lana’s eyes widened. You asked her? A microcephalic patient with barebones comprehension of the English language? “She should be back soon. She’s been aiding me with the experiment in the absence of my… former assistant.”

Mary Eunice shook her head, like she tried to clear her mind. “You—she—what?”

“Pepper isn’t as you remember her. Something very great has changed her. She has great intelligence now. Her transformation is unprecedented. She’s a miracle of science. Or of God, I suppose you could say.”
Lana and Mary Eunice exchanged a look. We told Father Joseph to make room for a woman barely capable of wiping her own ass. Is he lying? That’s impossible. It’s not possible. But before either of them could challenge him, the leaves and snow crunched with footsteps once again, and this time, the barren branches of the trees parted for Pepper, tiny in her stature and wide eyes regarding the three of them. Mary Eunice gasped with delight at the sight of her, a slight sparkle coming to her eyes, though not masking the pain there. Pepper smiled.

Her smile looks different. She no longer held the vacant, innocent happiness in her eyes, but rather a smile as mundane as the one worn by everyday people, cynical even when donned genuinely. “Sister Mary Eunice.” Both of their jaws cracked, slamming down into open gapes, at the clear address, not touched by a lisp or a slur. “It’s good to see you again. You were the first person to treat me with any kindness in years. I’m glad to see you’ve returned to your former self. The change of character didn’t suit you.” Mary Eunice ogled at her, totally blank in her regard, and Pepper inclined an eyebrow. “I realize it is a shock to find me this way. I have been aiding Dr. Arden in his experiments, though he is woefully behind where he could be, given proper technology and understanding of mathematics.”

Mary Eunice’s voice choked in her throat. “Do you—We came to—We thought you might want to—” Her breath hitched. She wasn’t expecting Pepper to have any sense of liberty. She expected Pepper to accompany her without a struggle. We didn’t anticipate having to ask her.

Pepper grinned. “It’s about time someone believed my innocence.”

“I saw it—” Mary Eunice stammered. “I saw it. In your head. What happened. I’m so sorry I ever condemned you.”

“You never condemned me. You were my friend. The first I had had in a very long time, and I was and still am grateful for your charity. Many within the church don’t share your values, even the ones the church claims to embody.” Pepper held her gaze, firm and steady. A thick sheen of tears rested on the surface of Mary Eunice’s eyes. “However, I’m afraid I can’t come with you. I belong here.”

Mary Eunice’s lips fluttered open, trying to form a sentence. “But—you don’t, you don’t belong here at all. Briarcliff was made for criminals, the criminally insane, not people like you.”

“There are no people like me, Sister.” Pepper looked back up to Dr. Arden, who shifted his weight from foot to foot as if with discomfort. “Briarcliff is my home now. And even if it wasn’t, I have friends here. I couldn’t bring myself to abandon them when they haven’t earned their place any more than I did.” Dr. Arden bit the tip of his tongue between his teeth, rolling it, but Pepper didn’t restrain herself. “I owe it to them to stay. Jude would be lost without me.”

A faint noise rose from Mary Eunice, and she looked at Lana, her face growing pale and her mouth open with desperation. Lana narrowed her eyes, flanking Mary Eunice more closely at her bewildered look. “Sister Jude is dead,” she said. “The Monsignor said so.”

“It wouldn’t be the first thing the Monsignor lied about.” The words emerged from Dr. Arden’s mouth, grated like cheese. “He reassigned everyone. He had Mother Claudia removed from her post at the abbey and sent to Brazil—”

Mary Eunice shook her head. “No, the Monsignor wouldn’t lie about that!” Her torn voice made Lana ache on the inside. Her face screwed up again, like someone in great pain.

Dr. Arden’s expression softened at the sound of her broken voice. Bile rose in Lana’s throat as she watched his face, how it twisted with emotion at the sight of Mary Eunice but had no sympathy for anyone else, no empathy for the world or the people within it. “What were you told? About
Mary Eunice’s tight face refused to loosen enough for her to speak. Lana answered, “He evaded Father Joseph for months. It took this long for us to hear that Sister Jude committed suicide not long after we left, before the Monsignor had the chance to reappoint her to her position as head.”

His lip curled. “Lies. All of it, nothing but lies.”

“Why are you still here? If he reassigned everyone, why did he let you stay?”

“I’m here because I know too much.” Dr. Arden’s brief, soft expression vanished, hardening once again, as he looked Lana in the eye. “Briarcliff was mine before it was his. I wouldn’t allow him to take it from me. I told him I would reveal the atrocities happening in the name of the church if he dismissed me—even if it damned me in the process. I’ve nothing left to lose but this sanitarium. So I vowed my silence and he allowed me to stay.”

Mary Eunice cut in, her whisper as light as the breeze rustling through the bare branches. “Where is Sister Jude, really?” She wound her fingers tighter through Lana’s.

He held her gaze. “I signed the death certificate of one Jude Martin in September. She now lives as Betty Drake in Briarcliff. She’s allowed in the day room like any other patient, as long as she behaves herself. When she has spells of clarity, they call it madness and put her in solitary. She spends more of her time there than anywhere else. Everyone thinks she’s mad. The only one who knows different is the Monsignor, and he sates her with promises of freeing her every time he sees her.” Mary Eunice made a thin whimper in the back of her throat. “I never thought him so despicable. I never thought Jude would be deserving of my pity, either, but what he’s done to her is as sorry as it comes.”

Pepper said, “Jude doesn’t belong here. No more than I do. And I won’t leave her. I can’t bring myself to betray her the same way the Monsignor has.”

The pit of Lana’s stomach trembled, volatile as the evil permeating the air of the forest; she had two warring sides inside of her, one which argued Jude had stared into the face of insanity long enough for the insanity to break her, one which argued Jude deserved her freedom as much as Lana did. Jude had locked her away. She tormented Wendy. Mary Eunice had brought that up, the first suggestion that Lana should have resented Jude. Perhaps I should. But Lana didn’t resent her, no more than she resented herself. Jude had granted her her freedom and allowed her to escape. Jude had grown. I have to return the favor. As Mary Eunice quivered with a weak, muffled sob, Lana trailed the pad of her thumb over her knuckles, hoping to offer some consolation. “We have to get her out of there, then. We can’t let them torture her. She doesn’t deserve to rot in there with all of the other loonies.”

Dr. Arden raised an eyebrow at her. I’m not taking no for an answer. Mary Eunice had already mourned Sister Jude once. She didn’t deserve to face the pain of abandoning her here for a second time. She had blamed herself for Jude’s death, a death which hadn’t happened at all, and she would without a doubt blame herself if they left Jude in the asylum to rot. Lana narrowed her eyes, holding his gaze hot and dark until he loosened his set jaw. “I don’t have the authority to release her from the custody of the asylum. The Monsignor is the only one with that power, and he would never agree to it.”

“You have the authority to sign her death certificate. You did it once.” Lana glared up at him. His extra foot of height didn't frighten her. He wouldn't lay a hand on her in front of Mary Eunice; he was too desperate to impress her, his eyes darting back to her, where she wiped away her tears with her hands. “We have to take her away from here. It's what she deserves. We can't leave her in there to suffer. I promised her I would make sure she got out. The Monsignor is a liar, he lied to
both of us, but I'm not.”

He raised his hands, palms open, surrendering. “I don't have the keys to any of the cells or access to anything in the sanitarium anymore. The Monsignor stripped me of all of my privileges. I can get you into my office, but no further than that, and I definitely can't get into solitary. I think you're gravely overestimating the power I hold here—”

“I can get to solitary.” Pepper crossed her arms. “If it gets Jude her freedom… I think I have a plan.”

Lana followed them down the narrow, dark corridor which she had never expected to walk again, which was foreign yet familiar. Her stomach crawled with a thousand spiders, and she refused to release Mary Eunice's hand from her own, clutching tighter the deeper and danker the tunnel grew. Dr. Arden led the way, his tall silhouette the only thing visible against the gray backdrop, the only reminder that they didn't traverse the tunnel in complete solitude. Mary Eunice's breath hitched in her ear, and she shivered. Lana rubbed the back of her hand with her thumb. It's okay, she wanted to say. But she couldn't bring herself to provide the verbal comfort in front of Pepper and Dr. Arden. The things she had learned to protect herself, to guard their relationship, would not disappear even in friendly company, let alone before an ex-Nazi and an artificially augmented microcephalic patient. Mary Eunice quivered, one hand still fondling the ring on the necklace to comfort herself.

Lana had seen the inside of Dr. Arden’s office, once, but she couldn’t remember it well; she only remembered the pain when they strapped her down to the table and electrocuted her over and over again, until her thoughts lost all clarity and she forgot where she was, why she was here, why she wasn’t with Wendy. “I’ll call Sister Clarence down here,” Pepper said, “and we can anesthetize her and steal her keys and her habit, so we can get Jude out.” No one questioned her plan or its moral injustices, victimizing an innocent nun who had no choice in the matter, who didn’t know Jude’s real identity. Dr. Arden drew up some medication into a syringe while Pepper left the room to do as she said, leaving Mary Eunice shivering in the back corner, both eyes closed, lips moving in silent prayers, which Lana could read from her mouth: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise. O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me.”

Her brow quirked, and she tugged Mary Eunice closer by her arm, resting one hand on the inside of her elbow while the other still clutched at her fingertips. Mary Eunice didn’t so much as blink in response. I can’t interrupt her prayer. But worry churned in the pit of her gut, and she pressed a soft kiss to her cheek, trusting the shadows of the corner they’d wedged themselves into to obscure them from view. Mary Eunice lowered her head at this, whimpering a thin sound, before she whispered, “Lana, I… Something’s wrong. I think something’s wrong…” She hiccuped, bowing her head, eyes shutting tight. “I’m afraid something’s wrong.”

Lana reached up to cup her cheek in one hand. “What do you mean? Do you feel well?” As Mary Eunice blinked, something glimmered deep inside her blue eyes, some unspeakable anguish which Lana had never seen there before. “What are you afraid of? Would you rather us leave?” I don’t want to leave Jude here. But if Mary Eunice did, she would leave without question. She trusted Mary Eunice’s word over her own perceptions and valued Mary Eunice’s needs over her own wants. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I—I don’t know, I just feel, I feel like, I’m so…” Her eyes flashed as if in the light of the room, but only shadows surrounded them. Before Lana could question her, she slammed her eyes shut again, making a thin keening noise in the back of her throat. She shuddered. “Lana, I love you.” She said it desperately, like she feared she wouldn’t have the opportunity to say it again.

“I love you, too.” Lana frowned. Mary Eunice didn’t tell her if she wanted to leave, didn’t say anything else at all, her face turning behind her closed eyes, expression crumpling and loosening
over and over again. What's wrong? But before she could ask the question, footsteps echoed down the hallway, Pepper’s voice, feigning her disability once again, the nun answering her with exhausted quips. Dr. Arden waited behind the door.

Sister Clarence entered the room, a slatternly woman in her mid-forties with wrinkles upon her face and gray hairs in the bangs protruding from her veil. “Dr. Arden? Are you down here? Pepper seems to have convinced herself there’s something horrible going on down here.” She waited with crossed arms, an impatient look upon her face, but when no one emerged, it faded, replaced with a look of genuine concern. “Dr. Arden? Where are you?” She stepped deeper into the office and reached for the light switch. “Doctor?” As the dim light illuminated the room, she caught sight of Lana first. “Excuse me! Who are you? What are you—” Her gaze flicked to Mary Eunice. “What do you think you’re doing down here? This is private property!”

Dr. Arden stepped out from behind the door. “I apologize, Sister, sincerely.” Her lips opened in an O of question, but before she could utter a word, he plunged the syringe into the side of her neck, injecting her with the medication he’d drawn up. Her eyes widened, but she didn’t speak; she didn’t have the opportunity before her legs caved underneath her, and Dr. Arden caught her to keep her from collapsing, spreading her out on the floor. Pepper pounced on top of her and began to unbutton her habit, drawing it back off of her body, exposing the ratty white shirt beneath it and the torn skirt.

Lana stepped forward. “What the hell? What was in that? Is she okay?”

“How do you know?” Lana glanced back at her, but before she could ask the question, Dr. Arden tossed the syringe away. “Anesthetic. She’ll be out for a few hours. We’ll be in and out before she knows anything happened at all.” Pepper tossed the keys at them, and Lana caught them. “Sister, will you wear this? You’ll blend in better than any of the rest of us. You know the way to solitary.”

Mary Eunice set her jaw, but her lips trembled, even as she nodded in a weak agreement, like she thought she had no other choice. Lana wanted to grab her and pull her back and offer to take her place, but she had no idea how to get through Briarcliff to solitary confinement, let alone missing all of the other staff members who might realize she didn’t belong. She didn’t know how to act like a nun, how to walk like a nun, how to talk like a nun; she didn’t know how to make herself blend in here. Instead, she took the habit from Pepper and helped Mary Eunice put her arms into the sleeves. “It’s going to be okay.” Lana smoothed a hand down the front of her habit and began to button it. They couldn’t talk in front of the watchful eyes upon them. We’ll be out of here soon. We’ll get Jude and Pepper out of here and take them to Father Joseph and tell him what happened, and we’ll tell him about all of the lies the Monsignor has told, and we’ll figure out what to do from there. We’ll expose him. We’ll make sure he lives with knowing what he’s done. Lana touched Mary Eunice’s cheek with one hand, but her eyes had closed tight once again, her mouth forming another string of silent prayers. “Mary Eunice?” I wish I could kiss her.

Her eyes opened to narrow slits, like she feared to open them all the way, the same way she had looked at her when they were in the shower together, afraid to meet Lana’s gaze. But this fear ran much deeper than the fear of feeling lust; this fear made Lana want to grab her and sweep her away and wrap her up tight and bundle them both in blankets in their bed, miles away from this horrible place and the horrible people within. Her stomach rumbled, amiss, at the terrified lines around her girlfriend’s mouth and eyes. “I’ll be okay.” Her bare whisper didn’t convince Lana. She took the ring of keys from Pepper. “I know the way.”

“We’ll follow you,” Dr. Arden said. “At a distance. If you get into trouble, we’ll know, and we’ll get you out. Just go straight and fast.”
Mary Eunice gave Lana one last long, torn look. *Oh, Lana, I’m so afraid.* A dull rumble in the back of her mind, a pain in the pit of her stomach, a fuzziness before her eyes, they all troubled her, whispers leaking from inside of her ears, the words indiscernible but the intent behind them absolutely evil. “Yes, Doctor.” She turned on her heel and headed up the hall to the staircase. Her footsteps echoed back at her, as hollow as the inside of her chest. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.* Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. She swallowed hard. A familiar, bitter taste worked its way up from under her tongue, as wretched as the flavor of rotten meat. A long breath puffed from her flaring nostrils, keeping her eyes closed; she had climbed these stairs so many times, she didn’t need her eyes to keep from stumbling. She knew the path like she knew the back of her own hand. Behind her eyes, she pictured a white light, the silhouette of a cross before it. She gulped, fighting to keep it in her sight, but the whispers in her mind grew only louder.

*Don’t be stupid. That isn’t how it happened last time. You’re making things up in your head and scaring yourself, and you’re scaring Lana. She doesn’t know what’s going on.* Mary Eunice’s stomach flipped. She couldn’t afford to lose herself. Lana was here. Lana needed her. She couldn’t allow herself to hurt Lana, not again. I think I’m going to puke. She breathed through her nose, keeping her jaws closed tight so she knew she wouldn’t spew everywhere. Calm down. We’re going to be fine. We’re going to get Sister Jude, and everything will be fine. I’ll tell her I’m sorry. Mary Eunice’s heart skipped a beat. She couldn’t manage to feel joy, even knowing Jude was still alive—those whispers had robbed her of all happiness. The fear budding inside of her was unmanageable, like marching straight into one of her night terrors, except she knew that if she started to scream now, she wouldn’t awaken in Lana’s arms, safe in the comfort of their bedroom.

Once, she glanced over her shoulder, but her followers had made themselves invisible; she assumed they had taken different routes to get to solitary. A group of four people was conspicuous, especially in the halls of Briarcliff, where almost everyone walked alone on their own individual missions of keeping the insane well-fed and alive. *I hope Pepper stayed with Lana.* She hated to think what could happen if Lana got lost within the halls of the asylum, how hard it would be to spring her out for a second time if someone caught her.

One of the varied whispers grew louder—loud enough for her to understand its distinct words. *Wouldn’t that just be tragic, Sister? As tragic as the fate which brought you back to us.*

Her throat closed up. *No, no, no…* The voice grew louder. She whirled around, gazing down the deserted hall, but with none of her allies in sight, she knew she couldn’t flee, not without abandoning them inside. Lana. She had to find Lana. *Lana is going to solitary. Find Jude, get out of here, get out of here.* She ducked her head and sprinted down the corridor. Suddenly, blending in wasn’t as important as she had first thought. *Leave me alone! Stay out of my head! Hail Mary, full of grace—*

*It’s futile, Sister. You know we always win! We are Legion, for we are many.* Hot blood charged through her veins, but Mary Eunice kept running, shoving past two other nuns, who both cried out in surprise but who didn’t pursue her. She cut through the cells in the men’s ward and ignored their taunts. One of them flung something, but she was too quick. *Give in. Give yourself to us. You were so delicious the last time, the sweet taste of your innocent soul when we devoured it. We regret letting you escape so soon…*

*The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.* The venomous thoughts wouldn’t break her. She counted the beads of her rosary in her mind, but instead of the white cross, Lana’s face floated there, behind her eyes, the image more sacred to her than any crucifix. *Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.* The voice in her head didn’t soften, but it didn’t gain control, either; she held the ring of
keys in her hand and fingered Lana’s ring with the other. The terror inside of her had blocked out her joy, but it didn’t overwhelm her love for Lana. It couldn’t. It was impossible.

*You’re fighting harder, this time. Someone’s made you plucky. Given you more to lose, it seems. I’m sure you’ll like it when I make you slit her throat.* Mary Eunice whipped past the last of the men’s cells and turned to head into the ward for solitary confinement. “Sister Jude!” she shouted into the corridor, not caring who else heard; if she found Jude, she could unlock the cell, and they could all run far, far away from here. *You’ll give in. They always do. They always underestimate our strength. They always forget the inherent weakness to human souls. Every knee will bow if you put enough weight on their shoulders!* “Sister Jude!”

A feeble reply answered her from down the dark stone hall. “I’m here. I’m in here…” Mary Eunice lifted the flap of one locked cell to peer in at Sister Jude, all tangled up in a straight jacket, rank hair hanging around her face in greasy knots. “Who knows my name?”

Mary Eunice’s hands trembled. *Hail Mary, full of grace...* She chanted the prayer over and over again to keep herself from listening to the demonic voice growling into her ear. Thrusting the key into the lock, she twisted until the gears turned and the door swung open. “It’s me, Sister, it’s me—the Monsignor lied, he lied to us—” She dropped the keys into her pocket and scrambled toward Sister Jude on her hands and knees, tearing the velcro and the strings which bound her in the straight jacket. “We’re going to take you out of here, I’m going to take you somewhere safe, please, trust me.” She ripped the bindings from her ankles and dragged her to her feet, skinny and weak, hair more silver than Mary Eunice had ever seen it, the scent of urine attached to her breath, her bones protruding. *They’ve been starving her.* “Sister Jude, please, come with me.”

They stumbled out of the dark cell, but in the dim light of the hallway, Sister Jude froze, studying her with both eyes. Mary Eunice dragged at her, but Sister Jude held firm, refusing to budge where her feet had rooted themselves into the floor. She faced her, a pleading look upon her face, but before she could speak, Sister Jude did, her eyes glittering with fear and hate. “The Devil is within you, still.” She jerked her hand away from Mary Eunice’s. “The Devil has many tricks! Many tricks!” She staggered back, away from Mary Eunice, and as Mary Eunice stumbled after her, retreating to her straight jacket, picking up the torn fabric by the sleeves. “The Monsignor would not lie!”

“He did—He told us you were dead, he said you’d k-killed yourself, please—”

*She can’t hear you, Sister. We made sure she would never hear anyone ever again. Don’t you remember? Don’t you remember when you took away her ability to reason? Don’t you remember when you deafened her to all logic? When you silenced her for us? Don’t you remember how glorious that made you feel?* Mary Eunice closed her eyes tight, fighting off the evil inner voices, which wormed their way deeper inside of her with each passing moment, even as she gathered her prayers and began to utter them once again. “I must do what the Monsignor couldn’t bring himself to do.”

Mary Eunice’s eyes fluttered wide at the words. Sister Jude whipped the straight jacket at her. She flinched back, but she was too slow; Sister Jude had the sleeve of the straight jacket pulled around her neck. *No!* On reflex, she crawled away, but that only gave Sister Jude the opportunity to pull the sleeve taut, crossing the ends over each other and snatching with all of her strength. *I can’t breathe!* Mary Eunice flipped over onto her back, dragging Jude with her—Jude was tiny and weakened by the months of hell she had endured here, and Mary Eunice was plump for the first time in her life from living with Lana. She rolled out into the hallway and grabbed Sister Jude by the front of her shirt, the other hand clawing at the sleeve. Jude’s lanky hands closed around her throat, pinning the sleeve in place. *No, no, no—*

*Let us in, Sister, and we’ll free you. Let us in, and we’ll make her regret she ever thought she
could harm you. Mary Eunice’s mouth gaped open, trying to breathe, trying to suck in deep breaths which died where the hands closed around her throat. Let us in, Sister! Her willpower grew weaker with her consciousness, big black blots dancing in her vision around Sister Jude’s face. Beyond Jude, she made out the shape of another figure. At first glance, she thought, Lana? but the figure didn’t come to her aid, and as she narrowed her eyes, she made out the form of the Shachath, melancholy in her heavy black attire.

The vision faded. “Mary Eunice!” The voice was Lana’s. As Mary Eunice sagged, prepared to surrender her consciousness, knowing the price she would pay, it broke the silent, still air of the hallway. “Get off of her!” Lana kicked Jude aside and untied the jacket from around her neck, discarding it. “Oh my god, Mary”—Lana’s hands caressed her cheeks. “Mary, say something.”

I can’t wait to see the look on her face when we make her fly through the air. I can’t wait to see her horror when she sees how we got back inside of you and made you ours once again. Mary Eunice seized against the voices, louder now than ever before, wresting away from Lana’s touch. “Lana—” Her voice was a thin croak. “It’s happening again, it’s—”

Sister Jude dragged herself up on the wall and tried to jump on Mary Eunice again, shrieking at the top of her lungs. Mary Eunice bowed her head and curled up into a ball, tucking into herself. Hail Mary, full of grace, now and at the hour of our death, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, love never fails. Her brain chained together prayers and Bible verses in a backward fashion, more than she could dream, more than she could think, as Jude’s hands pummelled her, as Lana tried to drag her away. Jude shrieked right into her ear.

“Hey! What the hell is going on here?” Mary Eunice spied a guard at the end of the hall, behind him Dr. Arden and Pepper, both running. Dr. Arden was slowed by age. Pepper, no longer human, whipped past him. “Get off of her!” The guard leveled his pistol. Which one of us is he aiming at?

Let us in, Sister, and no one has to die.

The gun fired. Mary Eunice cringed at the deafening echo. Lana folded herself on top of her. Jude withdrew, shrinking into a tiny shape, pressing tight against the wall. Feet away from them, Pepper sprawled. Blood gushed from her mouth. With her arms outstretched, she dragged herself along on her belly, a gaping wound in her back going all the way through her front, leaving a bloody streak mark on the stone floor. She reached upward toward Jude with desperate eyes. Her garbled speech emerged: “El… Sa…” Then, she fell slack.

Lana grabbed Mary Eunice under the arms and hauled her up. “Run!” Mary Eunice scrambled to her feet and dashed down the hall at her command, wasting no time in looking back at Dr. Arden or the man who had killed Pepper. I’ve got to get out of here, I’ve got to get out of here, I need to go to the church, I need Father Joseph— A desperate scream, Lana’s voice, ripped her out of her internal reverie.

Dizzy from all of the spinning, she whipped around to find Lana tangled up in the arms of the guard, fighting him, wrenching his hand so the gun pointed anywhere but at her. “Lana!”

You know the strength we have, Sister.

Just like in her dreams, when she wielded the power of the demon to protect herself and Lana, she forfeited the match. The power flushed through her veins, full and evil and boiling hot, and with a jerk of her hand, the gun flew through the air and clattered to the floor several feet away. The guard gathered Lana by her hair. Mary Eunice narrowed her eyes at him. In the blink of an eye, she stood right behind him. She hadn’t moved her legs. “Drop her.” He did. Lana fell to the floor, gasping for air, both eyes straining up at Mary Eunice with mingled disbelief and fear. She flung
his body into one of the empty cells. It smashed against the wall. Cracks spread through the rock. Blood oozed from him. She slammed the door closed with her mind and locked it, anyway. I just killed him. I just killed a man.

Oh, you stupid slut. We’ll kill everyone in this godforsaken building, and then we’ll move into the city. We’re going to get the men of God to worship us. But first… The demon fixed its orange gaze on Lana, where she reclined, breathless, on the floor. Lana lay there, panting, sweat-streaked, weak, hardly anything formidable. We want to know what her blood tastes like. We want to know what it looks like to separate her skin from her flesh while she’s still alive. We want to know what kinds of sounds she’ll make.

Lana’s dark eyes flitted up to Mary Eunice for the first time. At first, they were heavy, hooded, seeking the affectionate gaze of her lover, but they widened. “Mary Eunice?” she whispered, incredulous. “Your eyes…” Mary Eunice took a slow step, advancing on her. Lana pedaled backward, away from her. “Mary?” She was on all fours, desperate to escape, but afraid to leave her lover. Her thoughts ran straight through Mary Eunice’s mind, like Lana had spoken them aloud. What the hell? What’s wrong with her? It can’t be, it can’t be, it can’t be happening again. Oh, please, no. I’m not leaving her, I can’t leave her here. “Mary Eunice?” Lana whispered one more time, desperate and weak. Her back collided with the wall of the hallway.

Fists pounding on the glass in her own mind, Mary Eunice fought to control her own body. She had needed the power, she had needed to protect Lana, but it was worthless, now, if she couldn’t save herself. Let me out! Get out of me! Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee!

The demon hissed. You pathetic little creature. Your make believe stories and prayerful rhymes don’t frighten me. It grinned at Lana. “The human girl let me have her so I could keep him from killing you.” Lana cringed, folding her knees up to her chest, shivering. “She’s singing to me, now. Begging me not to hurt you. Chanting her little futile prayers.” There’s no priest to save you now, Sister. There’s no one to perform an exorcism. You’re trapped. “She fought hard. She’s stronger than she was before. She has more to lose… You, in particular—you’re very important to her.” Lana’s throat bobbed as she gulped. “So it’s only courteous for me to make her watch as I strip the flesh from your bones. I think she’s been depriving herself…” Lana gathered up onto her limbs and began to scramble away. “Not so fast.” The demon plucked her up by the back of her neck with telekinesis like a mother cat lifting a kitten and dropped her back on the floor.

Stop it! Don’t hurt her! Mary Eunice wrestled with the demon, gathering all of her willpower to fight the entity. She had a small stash of weapons, her puny willpower, her list of prayers and Bible verses she knew by heart, her love for Lana—the last one the largest and most important, the sharpest sword, and she wielded it against the demon, which could never know anything about love. I won’t let you hurt her! She felt her own arms and legs. She moved one arm of her own accord, by her own volition, just jerking it in an experiment. The temporary control stalled the ghoul. I love her! I love her, real love, and you can’t take it away from me!

Lana’s hands sprawled out behind her where she landed on the floor. One of them landed on the barrel of the gun the guard had dropped—the gun which Mary Eunice, which the thing inhabiting her body, had made him fling aside before she had killed him. What the hell? She glanced back at it, the cold steel burning into her skin, and on reflex, she seized it, pointing it at Mary Eunice, both quivering hands cupping its butt. “Don’t come any closer!” But she scanned Mary Eunice with her desperate gaze, watching the war happen on her face. She’s still fighting. Her face contorted and writhed like she was suffering a seizure right where she stood.

One arm extended, but then it flattened down, and then it lifted again. “Drop it!” Power brushed over her, hot and evil and weighing her down, but it didn’t strike. “Lana—” This voice was Mary
Eunice’s, hers down to its very quiver. The other one used her vocal cords, but it could not mimic the sweet tone she used when she spoke aloud. “Lana, please, shoot me, Lana, shoot me—” Her face screwed up. “Drop the gun, or I’ll devour her soul! You’ll never see her again! I can read your mind, little girl, and I can promise you, every ounce of pain that Wendy felt, I’ll make her endure it. You have no idea what I’m capable of, what I can do to her. You have no idea what I’ll do to her soul before I make it disappear forever. Drop the gun unless you want her spirit to die inside of her body!”

Oh, god. Lana panted a desperate, cold breath, the gun weighing her down. She closed her eyes tight. No, this isn’t happening. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. This is just a bad dream. I’ll wake up and she’ll be okay and we can take a shower together. “Lana…” Mary Eunice’s voice cracked. “Please, kill me… Please, Lana, I’m begging you.”

She pinched the gun in a vice grip between her hands, afraid of the demon tearing it away from her before she had the opportunity to think—she needed to think, she needed to think this through, she needed to give herself time to wake up from this night terror and embrace the real Mary Eunice. She asked me to kill her. The conversation rang through her head once again, something she hadn’t ever expected to reflect on. “If something happens, where I can’t control myself anymore, and I’m hurting people, will you stop me?” Mary Eunice had asked her. A bitter flavor rose up in the back of her throat. She hadn’t promised anything. She’d said she couldn’t do it. And, as she locked eyes with Mary Eunice, she knew she was right. Those desperate eyes were blue again, flickering orange like a candle but squashing down the evil before it could lash out against Lana, and they held all of the familiar love and anguish Lana knew so well. She loosened her grip on the gun, shaking her head. “I can’t.” She lowered the barrel of the gun from where it pointed at Mary Eunice. “I love you.”

Her mouth fell open, anguish gnarling her expression. “Lana,” she whispered, voice as light as stars twinkling in the night sky. “I love you.” She extended a hand, and the power settled over Lana again, but this time, it didn’t hold the same evil gravity. “I understand.” The power scooped the gun out of her hand, gentle as the wind accompanying a light rain. Lana watched her face, mouth hanging agape. She’s still in control. She’s using its powers against it. She’s controlling its powers for herself. The gun floated toward her. It landed in Mary Eunice’s open palm. She closed her fingers around it.

“Mary Eunice?” The confused utterance of her name floated from Lana’s lips. “What are you doing?” Mary Eunice didn’t answer her, but she pressed the barrel of the gun to the underside of her chin. “No! No, Mary, no—” Lana scrambled, trying to get to her feet, but the power pinned her down, paralyzed her. It brushed over her eyes, tender as two thumbs closing her eyelids so she wouldn’t watch. “Mary Eunice, stop! Please, please!” She thrashed against the power. “Don’t do this! Oh, god, please, no!”

Mary Eunice ignored her. She spoke again, but her voice had a courageous, hard note to it which she never would have used to address Lana. “Leave me alone, or I’ll kill both of us.” Silence answered her. “I see the angel. She’s ready for me. And she knows just what to do with you. She knows just where you belong. She’ll get rid of you for good.” She shivered. “I don’t know what waits for me on the other side, but if it keeps you away from Lana, away from everyone here, I’ll take it.” Lana choked on her sob. Please, don’t let her do this. The tears poured down her cheeks, though she couldn’t open her eyes. “Three. Two. One.”

Every muscle in Lana’s body tensed in anticipation for a second gunshot to ring out. Instead, the gun clattered to the floor, and the supernatural power vanished. Lana opened her eyes and scrambled across the floor to where Mary Eunice had collapsed. “Mary Eunice!” Lana framed her face in both hands. Her skin burned back at her, hot as a coal. Her muscles were tense, stiff as boards; Lana couldn’t bend her arm. Her eyes opened to tiny slits, but they lolled back into her
skull, and a seizure tugged her into its grips. “Mary, Mary—” Her limbs thrashed underneath her. Lana leaned forward, trying to pin her down. “Oh my god, Mary Eunice—”

Dr. Arden appeared from where he had hung back, observing the confrontation. “Don’t hold her down. Get your hands out of her mouth.” He propped Mary Eunice up on her side. “She’s burning up. What the hell does that mean?”

“It’s over—It’s over, she beat it—she had a fever the last time, too.” Mary Eunice kept seizing, her limbs jerking and thrashing. Her tongue dangled out of her open mouth. “I don’t know if she had seizures before, I wasn’t there, but she had a fever when they brought her to me.”

He glanced down at his watch. “It’s been a minute.” But, even as he spoke the words, the seizure trickled to a halt, the jerks slowing and easing. “We need to get out of here.” He scooped up Mary Eunice like a ragdoll. She sagged against his chest, eyes half-open but unresponsive. They marched past Sister Jude, who sat in the floor, cradling Pepper’s head, her unseeing eyes still open and gazing at nothing at all. Lana trotted after Dr. Arden, keeping stride with him, watching how Mary Eunice’s long hair spilled from over his arm with the veil of the other nun’s habit. He rounded a series of corners and headed down a back hallway so narrow, he had to turn sideways to make Mary Eunice’s length fit through the corridor. At the end of the hall, he headed down a staircase, back into the basement. They had entered through the back at the ground-level doors.

They passed back through his office and into the forest. The daylight still beamed down upon them; it seemed incongruous to her, with the horrors they had just faced. Outside the building, Dr. Arden caved, making it just to the clearing surrounded by trees before he dropped to his knees and placed Mary Eunice on her back in the snow. Lana sank down beside her. “Mary Eunice?” She touched one flushed, hot cheek. “Sunshine, can you hear me?”

The eyelids flickered up at her. “Lana…” Lana picked up her hands and put them on top of her body to keep them from getting frostbitten in the snow. The eyes were barely open into thin slits, like she could conjure no strength to open them wider. “Hold…” She exhaled through her mouth, eyes falling closed. Lana leaned forward, straining to hear what she had to say. “Hold me…” Lana scooped her up into her lap and kissed her hair where the veil had begun to slip off of her head. Mary Eunice lolled back, as spineless as a worm. “Everything hurts…”

Dr. Arden glared down at her. “What do you think you’re doing to her?”

Arms tight around her waist, Lana reciprocated his gaze. “I’m trying to comfort her, if you don’t mind.” Mary Eunice made a thin, wheezing sound, and Lana rubbed her chest with the flat of one palm.

“She needs a hospital. Where are you going to take her?”

“Until the hospital has a cure for telekinesis and teleportation, I’m taking her to the church.”

“She just had a grand mal seizure! She needs a doctor!”

“If Father Joseph agrees with you, I’ll cart her straight to the ER. She survived the last one without an attending physician, and I’ll be damned if I get her into any legal trouble for running to the hospital where it wasn’t necessary! Two people are dead!” Mary Eunice wriggled in Lana’s lap, exhausted eyes peering up at her with absolute adoration but terror equal to it. “Father Joseph won’t report her for killing anyone. He can’t.”

Dr. Arden glowered at her. “You’ve corrupted her. You’ve made her into one of your kind. The Monsignor never should have allowed it!”
Lana sneered. “It’s a damn good thing you didn’t take her and turn her into a Nazi!” Mary Eunice turned her head, and Lana eased up from behind her, standing. On rubbery limbs, Mary Eunice stood, leaning on Lana with half of her exhausted body weight to keep from collapsing on the spot. “We’re leaving. She’s coming with me. And I suggest you get the hell out of here before they start trying to pin the blame on someone. The Monsignor will cover this up like he did everything else. He’ll find a way to punish you.”

Dr. Arden said nothing more, merely staring at their backs as they retreated, and Lana hauled Mary Eunice through the frost-covered forest, down the trail back toward her car. Mary Eunice didn’t make a sound except for the heavy, raspy breathing in her chest, whistling like an asthmatic. Her feet shuffled over the earth, barely lifting, barely moving forward. She fell into the car. “Lana…” Her bleary eyes blinked up at Lana. “I’m so… I’m so sorry…”

“Sh, sweetheart, no, it’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong.” Lana removed her veil and unbuttoned the first buttons of the habit. She spread them out over her shivering body. “You just lie right here. Put your head in my lap.” Mary Eunice obeyed her. Lana unzipped her own coat to give her extra warmth. “I’ve got Tylenol in my purse. Here.” Lana shook out three pills from the bottle and dropped them onto Mary Eunice’s tongue. She swallowed them dry. “Okay. Just relax. I’m going to take you to Father Joseph. He’ll know what to do.”

“I love you, Lana.” Her voice was stuffy.

Lana swept her bangs out of her eyes. “I love you, too, Sister.” Why do I call her that? Lana didn’t know why, sometimes, the title felt more comfortable on her tongue than Mary Eunice’s given name or even their favored nickname. But it made a weak smile ease onto her face. It reminds her of her position in the church. Lana kissed her fingertips and pressed them to Mary Eunice’s cheek. “You’re going to be just fine.”

“I know. I’m with you.”

Some part of Lana’s heart broke. She nodded. “That’s right.” I almost killed her. I almost did it. It didn’t sting as much as she expected it to. Some part of her knew that she never could have convinced herself to pull the trigger. But the knowledge that she had held a gun, pointed it at Mary Eunice, left her unsettled. She shifted the car into gear and pulled out onto the main road, pointing toward the church, while Mary Eunice drowsed in her lap, exhausted by her internal battle.

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